THE FIFTH HUMOR: INK, TEXTS, AND THE EARLY MODERN BODY

Kristen Kayem Polster, B.A., M.A.

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2012

APPROVED:

Jacqueline A. Vanhoutte, Major Professor
Kevin Curran, Committee Member
Paul Menzer, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School

This dissertation tracks the intimate relationship between writing and the body to add new dimensions to humoral criticism and textual studies of Renaissance literature. Most humor theory focuses on the volatile, permeable nature of the body, and its vulnerability to environmental stimuli, neglecting the important role that written texts play in this economy of fluids. I apply the principles of humor theory to the study of handwritten and printed texts. This approach demonstrates that the textual economy of the period—reading, writing, publishing, exchanging letters, performing all of the above on stage—mirrors the economy of fluids that governed the humoral body. Early modern readers and writers could imagine textual activities not only as cerebral, abstract concepts, but also as sexual activities, as processes of ingestion and regurgitation.

My study of ink combines humoral, historical materialist, and ecocritical modes of study. Materialist critics have examined the quill, paper, and printing press as metaphors for the body; however, the ink within them remains unexamined. This dissertation infuses the figurative body of the press with circulating passions, and brings to bear the natural, biochemical properties that ink lends to the texts it creates. Considering the influence of written and printed materials on the body in early modern poetry and drama requires consideration of the murky liquid from which these texts were composed.

For early moderns, writing began with the precise, anatomical slicing of a goose feather, with the crushing of oak galls into wine or rainwater, with the application of heat and ferrous sulfate. These raw materials underwent a violent transformation to fill early
modern inkwells. As a result of that mystical concoction, the fluid inside these vessels became humoral. The ink on a page represented one person’s passions potentially invading the body of another. Therefore, ink serves as more than a metaphor for any particular humor. Pen and paper work as extensions of the body, and serve at turns as a mechanism of balance or imbalance.
Copyright 2012

by

Kristen Kayem Polster
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: &quot;BEAUTY'S REDDEST INK FOR HIM DOETH STIR:&quot; SONNETEERS, SEXUALITY, AND THE HUMORAL BODY</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Embodying the Petrarchan Sonnet</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: Body Compositions</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: Shakespeare's Bodies of Verse</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: CRYING OVER SPILT INK: WRITING AND THE RUINED WOMAN</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Lady Mary Wroth and the Dark Lady: Writing Ruination</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: Shakespeare's <em>Rape of Lucrece</em> and the Risky Publication of Female Virtue</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: PUTTING THE X IN TEXT: TEXTUAL SEXUALITY IN THREE SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDIES</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Ink and Roses: The Humorous Text in <em>Love's Labour's Lost</em></td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: The Tears of a Stag: Melancholy, Poetry, and Writing in Arden Forest</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: &quot;Her very c's, u's, and her t's.../ and thus makes she her great P's:&quot; The Sexuality of Letters in Twelfth Night</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD: INK, POISON, AND TRAGEDIES</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Written Violations: Tragic Letters and the Body</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: On Hamlet's Inky Cloak</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: Writing Anatomy: Poisonous Texts and the Humoral Body</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: INK AND THE BODY IN THE DIGITAL AGE</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
Invention, nature's child, fled step-dame study's blows;
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
'Fool', said my muse to me; 'look in thy heart, and write'.

—Sir Philip Sidney, Astrophil and Stella

One of the defining characteristics of the English Renaissance was an ever-growing, ravenous desire—for reading material. Between the 1550s and 1660s, English printing presses produced over 400,000 almanacs per year and over 3,000 separate ballads, along with countless Bibles, prayer books, primers, and grammars. The period saw an unprecedented dissemination of texts. I choose the words "ravenous" and "disseminate" here because they serve to equate, as much historical writing seems to do, textual desire with physical appetites and processes. The words historians use to describe the growth of literacy among the early moderns tend toward the body as their guiding metaphor. Keith Wrightson, for example, describes the changing "appetite" of "the newly literate 'middling sort.'" He notes that their tastes moved from popular ballads to religious tracts in search of "stronger meat." Contemporary observers of the proliferation of literature were apt to do the same. Sir Francis Bacon, in his essay "Of Studies," wrote, "...some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few

1 All references to Sidney are to Sir Philip Sidney: A Selection of His Finest Poems, ed, Katherine Duncan-Jones (New York: Oxford, 1994).
3 Ibid. 207.
to be chewed and digested."⁴ Such descriptions demonstrate the complex physical interactions between bodies and texts that pervade early modern writings, particularly the idea of ink as a substance that could be ingested. As the first eight lines from Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* show, the early modern body and written words were engaged in a constant emotional exchange that was more than metaphorical—"a dynamic reciprocit[y] between self and environment imagined by the psychophysiology of bodily fluids."⁵ When Sidney's speaker seeks inspiration from "others' leaves" in his library, he anticipates a "flow" of "fruitful showers" that will then move him to write. The ink on the page must act on his body in a way that will enable him to express his lovesick melancholy and rebalance his humors.

The verb "express" here, like Bacon's edible books or Sidney's "fruitful showers," is more than figurative. The primary usage of the verb in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was "To press, squeeze, or wring out; to press (juice, air, etc.) from, out of (anything). spec. to press or squeeze out (milk or other secretion) from the breast."⁶ The second usage, excepting specific references to breast-feeding, is the one more familiar to modern speakers of English: "To represent by sculpture, drawing, or painting; to portray, delineate, depict."⁷ In this dissertation, I argue that in Renaissance literature, these two types of expression intermingle in such a way that they become almost indistinguishable. Inked texts, whether handwritten or printed, emerge at this time as physical products that could and did affect people's bodies physically. In part, this

---


⁶ See "express v." in *Oxford English Dictionary* online.

⁷ Ibid.
phenomenon arises from humor theory and its influence on early modern perceptions of
the body, as many critics, most notably Gail Kern Paster, have argued. However, the
merging of text and body in the Renaissance imagination derived in equal measure from
the materiality of the texts themselves, particularly the manufacture and usage of ink for
both writing and printing. Ink, concocted (just like food or medicine) from materials of the
"dynamic[ally] reciproc[al]" natural world, served as a unique "fifth humor" capable of
both unbalancing and rebalancing all of the passions.

My methodology in examining ink's various effects on the humoral body is
twofold. First, I intend to track the intimate relationship between writing and the body in
order to add a new dimension to humoral criticism. Most humor theory focuses on the
volatile, permeable nature of the body, and on its vulnerability to environmental stimuli,
but neglects the important role that written texts play in this economy of fluids. I apply
the principles of humor theory to the study of handwritten and printed texts. By taking
this approach, I demonstrate that the textual economy of the period—reading, writing,
publishing, exchanging letters, and performing all of the above on stage—mirrors the
economy of fluids that governed the humoral body. Early modern readers and writers
could imagine textual activities not only as cerebral, abstract concepts, but also as
sexual activities, as processes of ingestion and regurgitation. For example, in his
Defense of Poesy, Sidney calls the poet "food for the tenderest stomachs," and calls
poetry "the first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled [the professedly learned] to
feed afterwards of tougher knowledges." Sidney's discussion of poetry as mother's milk
works in tandem with the image of the poet as "great with child to speak" to illuminate

---

\(^8\) Sidney, Sir Philip Sidney, 102, 113.
the biological circularity of reading and writing. Not coincidentally, Sidney also retells Menenius Agrippa's "Fable of the Belly" to demonstrate the power of poetic language to calm the hungry plebeian mob. The images Sidney invokes in the *Defense* and *Astrophil and Stella* are not unique to him, of course. Shakespeare would dramatize the same fable just over a decade later in *Coriolanus*—feeding the same poetics to the theatre-going public. All three of these texts exemplify the early modern tendency to imagine textual processes as physical processes. I analyze that cultural tendency in humoral terms; I then connect that analysis to writing and printing materials, particularly ink.

My study of ink combines humoral, historical materialist, and even ecocritical modes of study. Materialist critics have examined the quill, the paper, and the printing press as metaphors for the body—Margareta de Grazia, for example, analyzes the symbolism of signet rings and wax, and the male and female components of the printing press.\(^9\) However, the ink, the essential medium sealed beneath that wax, remains unexamined; de Grazia's analysis of the press, its manufacture, and all its working parts neglects the fluid essential to its function. This dissertation infuses the figurative body of the press with circulating passions, and brings to bear the natural and biochemical properties that ink lends to the texts it makes possible. The critical work on the implements of the handwritten word reveals a similar gap. For example, Jonathan Goldberg has discussed the anthropomorphic qualities of the quill and penknife, and he relates them directly to human anatomy.\(^10\) In "The Violence of the Letter," Goldberg

---


provides a compelling analysis of the frontispiece of Vesalius's 1543 *De humani corporis fabrica* in which he compares the violence of scalpel to specimen to the violence of pen and paper. However, like the illustration he describes, Goldberg's discussion is curiously bloodless. The muscles and bones of the specimen's hand appear, but no blood or fluids. And what is the point of cutting, if not to make blood flow? Of what use is an inkless pen? The early modern conception of the body depends on circulatory, volatile liquids.\(^{11}\) Only a dead body, an anatomical study, can be a dry shell. As we consider the influence of written and printed materials on the body in early modern poetry and drama, we must consider the variable and murky liquid from which these texts were composed.

In the fluid economy of texts, ink serves as more than a metaphor for any particular humor; it functions as an external manifestation of those humors. Pen and paper work as extensions of the body, and can serve at turns as a mechanism of balance or imbalance. Contemporary texts such as Timothy Bright's 1586 *Treatise on Melancholy* and Nicholas Breton's *Melancholicke Humours* exemplify a broad Renaissance conceit that much poetry springs from the melancholy humor; however, I would argue that many Renaissance texts, whether sonnets, plays, or letters, present ink as a fluid that can transmit and influence the whole spectrum of human passions. After all, the act of writing is, first and foremost, a physical act. A writer's ideas, like the "mother's milk" of poetry, arise from his or her humoral body—whether melancholy, phlegmatic, choleric, or sanguine. Through a process of distillation, those ideas are

\(^{11}\) Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 6.
expressed (both literally and figuratively) onto paper for other people to ingest—
sometimes at their peril.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet provides a perfect example of the potential toxicity of texts
to the human body. Galen considered "two causes of harm to our bodies: external
influences and excretions from food," and further identified "exhaustion, grief, insomnia,
[and] worry" as some of those external influences.\textsuperscript{12} Hamlet, Shakespeare’s most
famous melancholic, clearly suffers from all of these and more—not only because of his
father’s death, but because he is forced to internalize a particular story of that death.
The ghost of Old Hamlet pours a "leperous distilment" of words in Hamlet's ear to urge
him on to revenge (1.5.64).\textsuperscript{13} That verbal toxin leads to death as surely as poison in a
cup of wine or on the blunted tip of a sword. Old Hamlet uses his son as a mode of
physical transmission for his story—Hamlet becomes a living text to be fatally read by
not only Claudius and Gertrude, but by Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia. "Emotions flood
[Hamlet's] body not metaphorically but literally, as the humors course through the
bloodstream,\textsuperscript{14} and the story of his father's death follows suit. The humoral properties of
storytelling give Old Hamlet's words uncanny power over Hamlet's body. When Hamlet
asks for "his tables" to write the words of his father's tale, a contagion of ill humor
begins (1.5.112). Early modern ideas about the humoral affect and purpose of writing
shape this contagion. Written words, whether sonnets exchanged between young
lovers, dramas designed to incriminate, or letters used as props onstage, all resulted in
physiological changes. Words could both poison and impregnate; they could kill or they

\textsuperscript{13} All references to Shakespeare from \textit{The Norton Shakespeare}, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York:
W.W. Norton, 2008).
\textsuperscript{14} Paster, \textit{Humoring the Body}, 14.
could heal. In Hamlet's case, all the texts he encounters—whether story, drama, or letter—poison his body. The words he writes, speaks, and reads create the humoral imbalances that afflict him.

The textual cycle of Hamlet's humoral crisis suggests a fundamental link between mental and physical health and reading and writing, one that appears in a wide range of Renaissance dramas—from Bel-Imperia's bloody missive to Hieronimo in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, to the comical letter of the braggart Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Like Hamlet, Armado finds himself "besieged with sable-coloured melancholy" and then witnesses an "event that draweth from [his] snow-white pen the ebon-/coulored ink which here thou viewest..." (1.1.224, 23-235). The fictional character Armado suffers from the same malady as real poet Nicholas Breton, and seeks the same textual purgation for his melancholy. Hamlet reinforces the conflation of bodies and texts but with decidedly different results. Following his meeting with Old Hamlet's ghost, he refers to the "table of [his] memory" and the "book and volume of [his] brain" that shall henceforth remain "unmixed" (1.5.98, 103, 104). Hamlet chooses a poisonous text for his governing humor, and the result is conscious madness. According to Galen, the "faculties of the soul depend upon the mixtures of the body," and "the best constitution of the body is that in which all the homogeneous parts...retain their proper mixture."\(15\) The necessity of a proper mixture marks another commonality between the humoral body and an inkwell.

Just as Galen recommended an optimum humoral mixture for health, Renaissance recipes for ink advised a proper mixture to effectively transmit and

\(15\) *Galen: Selected Works*, 150, 292.
preserve words. Like the body, an inkwell and quill must contain a carefully balanced combination of fluids in order to work effectively. Too acidic, and the ink would eat through the paper. Too weak, and the ink would fade to brown over time and become illegible.  

According to Bright’s *Treatise*, burnt choler, a type of melancholy humor, suffers many of the failings of bad ink—too thick, too acidic, not the glossy, flowing liquid that it ought to be in a healthy person.  

Like a simmered medicine to combat humoral complaints, early modern ink was composed of biological, natural substances, mixed and heated in a vessel. Edward Cocker offers a typical recipe in his copybook *The Pen’s Triumph*:

> Take three Ounces of Galls which are small and heavy and crisp, put them in a vessel of three pint of Wine, or of Rain-water, which is much better, letting it stand so infusing in the Sun for one or two dayes; Then take two Ounce of Coppris, or of Roman Vitrial, well colour’d and beathen small, stirring it well with a stick, which being put in, set it again in the Sun for one or two dayes more. Stir all together adding two Ounces of Gum Arabique of the clearest and most shining, being well beaten. And to make your Ink shine and lustrous, add certain pieces of th Barque of Pomgranat, or a small quantity of double-refin’d Sugar, boyling it a little over a gentle fire. Lastly, pour it out, and keep it in a vessel of Glasse, or of Lead well covered.  

This recipe resembles the various recipes for simmering potions to combat melancholy.

In fact, botanist and surgeon John Gerard, in his 1597 *Great Herball, Or Generall*  

Historie of Plantes, notes that oak galls, or "oke apples," are "good against all fluxes of bloud and laskes," particularly when boiled in red wine.\textsuperscript{19} He also writes, in his description of the related "Galltree," that galls are "profitable againste the Dysenterie and the Coeliacke passion, being drunk in wine." The very next sentence notes that galls are used "in making of inke."\textsuperscript{20} The striking similarity between the distillation of humoral remedies and that of ink supports their conceptual proximity in Renaissance texts. Considering that the body was often construed as a vessel of volatile liquids concocted from food, drink, air, and blood, the inkwell and pen could easily have been viewed as extensions of that body.\textsuperscript{21} It is no coincidence, surely, that Cocker introduces his copybook as "containing the whole Alphabet; being all distill'd from the Limbeck of the Authors own Brain."\textsuperscript{22} A limbeck, also called an "alembic," is a glass vessel used for purifying or distilling liquids. The connection between such a vessel and a writer's brain graphically depicts the way ink and bodily fluids could have been viewed as part of the same biological system.

Medical literature of the period reinforces the power of the written word to alter the humors in the body. Louis Ferrand, in his Treatise on Lovesicknesse, for example, warns that "With the sense of hearing must be associated the reading of lewd and immoral books...[and] Just as dangerous are the letters and love notes crammed with enticing words..."\textsuperscript{23} As a remedy against love potions, Ferrand recommends "prayer,

\textsuperscript{19} John Gerard, The herball or Generall historie of plantes, (London: John Norton, 1597), 1341.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 1349.
\textsuperscript{21} Paster, Humoring the Body, 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Cocker, The Pen's Triumph, cover page.
the reading of good books, and other serious activities."^24 Perhaps these "serious activities" included some sort of writing to purge the ill humor, but one can imagine that the overblown love poetry of a character like Armado, or the concentrated ravings of Hamlet, were probably not what Ferrand had in mind. Ferrand would have likely agreed that the written word and the body, for better or worse, interacted intimately with one another. Bearing that in mind, the exchange of letters and poetry between two lovers takes on a variety of physical implications. The written text becomes more than a symbol of devotion or evidence of impurity—it becomes a symptom. No wonder, then, that Polonius is so eager for Ophelia to return all of Hamlet's letters. Such letters would not just provide evidence of a potential indiscretion—they constitute that indiscretion.

It is in this vein (pun intended) that Lady Mary Wroth, in her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, reminds her beloved of the physically destructive power of ink. She offers the unique perspective of a woman ruined by poetry as surely as by the act of intercourse. Her poetic suitor "may [her] fortune write/ In embers of that fire which ruind [her]" (P31.10-11).^25 The sonneteer's pen stains the paper in a way that prefigures his "staining" of his mistress's body, or, more graphically, as virgin blood might stain bed linens. The phallic nature of writing instruments is by no means a new discovery, but critics have paid little attention to the fluid within the pen. For example, in reference to Dekker's *Westward Ho*, Goldberg relegates to parentheses the important fact that "directions on making the ink sometimes recommend the addition of spit—or of urine" to

---

24 Ibid., 346.
yield smoother writing. To fully explore the connection between written materials and the humoral body, we must consider the liquid through which these thoughts and pictures are made visible.

Ink acted as a volatile fifth humor, expressing contents of the heart, brain, and soul. The expulsion of ink could rebalance a system brought to ill health by an excess of any of the four humors; people wrote to express lovesickness, melancholy, anger, boredom, lust, or any other emotional state. Conversely, the ingestion of ink, via the reading of a letter, the observation of a painting, or the consumption of poetry, presented the risk of upsetting one's humoral balance and beginning the process anew. Goldberg notes that "metaphors of the child or pen as mouth are not merely metaphors" but "coincide with the lived experience produced by writing." Indeed they do. I would add that none of the metaphors of textual creation that predominate in early modern drama and poetry were "merely metaphors." For early moderns, writing began with the precise, anatomical slicing of a goose feather, with the crushing of oak galls into wine or rainwater, with the application of heat and ferrous sulfate. These raw organic materials underwent a rather violent transformation to fill the inkwells of early modern writers. As a result of that mystical concoction, the fluid inside these vessels became humoral. The ink on a page represented the passions of one person potentially invading the body of another.

In the second chapter, I examine the degree to which pen and ink figure themselves as extensions of the male body, and therefore how the reception of poetry by a woman amounts to reception of the male seed. I demonstrate the ways the English

---

26 Goldberg, Writing Matter, 100.
27 Ibid., 100.
sonnet tradition uses ink as a medium to embody the mistress and thereby to interrogate Petrarchanism. In some cases, textual exchange even results in procreation, but when it does not, the exchange still involves a physical violation and response. When a suitor or sonneteer assails his mistress with handwritten words on a page or verses read aloud, he invades her body as surely as if he were to have sexual intercourse with her. The transmission of poetry presents itself as a physical act in the texts of the poems. I demonstrate the ways in which these poets establish a tradition of poetic violations of the female body informed by early modern humor theory and the physical properties of ink.

I track both the direct mentions of ink as a humoral medium, as in Sidney's "Beauty's Reddest Ink For Him Doth Stir," and the literal embodiment of the mistress through the medium of ink, as in Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets. I argue here that the sonnet tradition from Wyatt to Shakespeare moves in a progressive direction toward a complete collapse of the distinction between page and body, ink and humors. In Shakespeare's case, even the distinction between poet and object, male and female, becomes blurred. Viewing the sonnets through the dual lenses of humor theory and the material capacities of ink allows for a new and less binary interpretation of the sonnets.

The third chapter explores the intersection of manuscript culture and humor theory through the vessel of the female body. Considering the problematic nature of female reading and writing in the early modern period, along with the use of ink as a sort of "fifth humor," the chapter examines the deep physiological significance of textual exchanges between men and women. I juxtapose Lady Mary Wroth's Pamphilia and a selection of Shakespeare's ruined women characters—the Dark Lady, Lucrece, and
Ophelia, among others, to analyze the role writing plays in each of their physio-literary ruinations. Writing's influence over the tragic outcomes for each of these characters begins as an extension of the interrogation of Petrarchism that I discuss in the previous chapter.

For example, Shakespeare's descriptions of Lucrece from the lustful Tarquin's point of view echo the "downward" progression of the sonnets—from the alabaster-and-jewel imagery of Petrarch's Laura to more biological descriptions of the feminine beloved. Similarly, Wroth's Pamphilia finds poetic inspiration in her own ruin, "embers of the fire which ruind [her]" (27.11). Pamphilia refers to the words of her lover as alternately "famish[ing]" and giving "food" to her affections (13.1). She expresses, through her writing, "rage" that "feede[s] / Upon foule error which thes humours breed" (18.9, 10). Words, expressions of "spirit" (13.3) that they are, affect bodies profoundly, especially female bodies. For this reason, Ophelia finds herself ruined, in part, because she has accepted Hamlet's letters, Petrarchan-style verse, and verbal overtures. And certainly, the virtuous Lavinia's tortured writing, clutching a stick between the bloody stumps where her hands used to be, demonstrates writing springing from the ruined body as much as Lucrece's inky blood does. The descriptions of these female characters' ruinations illustrate the physical consequences that the ingestion of various texts has on a female love object and, by extension, on an audience. The spilling of blood and humors in these texts demonstrates dramatically the way a story passes (sometimes violently) from body to body through the fluid medium of ink. These characters embody the demise of the idealized Petrarchan mistress—they begin their
lives as just such artifacts of chastity and end them as grotesque exhibits of violated femininity.

In the fourth chapter I demonstrate the way letters that characters exchange and read on stage act as a sexual surrogate in Renaissance drama. The way written words function in the comedies confirms ink as a primary mode of not just metaphoric, but physical, perhaps even genetic, transmission. Letters, poems, and books serve more important functions than to simply provide information to the audience or move the plot forward. Exchanged in the context of a world informed by humor theory, any text that can enter the ears and eyes has the potential to change the very composition of the body. Letters and other intradramatic texts, such as poems, short plays, or books, serve as important tropes of personal exchange. The passage of writing between characters serves to both prefigure and refigure sexual intimacy or to expose hidden transgressions. The letters, books, and mini-plays of the early modern drama expand, contract, and even collapse the physical boundaries of the body.

Shakespeare's comedies in particular experiment with the metaphor of writing and sexuality. Mishandled or forged letters cause chaos in the reproductive economy, pairing lovers of the wrong class or gender, only to reorder it, in true comedic fashion, by the end of the play. The comedies offer women opportunities to write letters to men, to disseminate texts, and to ignore the boundaries between receiving and directing words. But the misdirection of writing corrects itself by the plays’ ends to uphold the patriarchal order. For example, in As You Like It, Rosalind may mock Orlando's crude Petrarchan verse, but she does pull his inscriptions down from the trees, read them, and accept his affections. Once they are married, their idealized, Petrarchan exchange will
necessarily devolve into an inferior but necessary biological exchange. The clean, overt exchange of texts will give way to the untidy exchange of bodily fluids and occult creation within the female body.

The comedies reinforce the power of textual intercourse to penetrate bodies and affect the way people's lives unfold. Written texts serve as vehicles of sexual exchange. The misinterpretation of written romantic advances along with promiscuous reading and writing are as much a part of the journey to the altar as blocking characters and sexual innuendoes. The righting of all the confusion at the end of a comedy culminates in the exchange of wedding vows, the ultimate exchange of the written word for sex. The letters exchanged between suitors and their objects make the mysteries of the female womb explicit, at least for a brief moment, and make the mysterious feminine interior available to her husband in the only way it really can be (ostensibly) before their wedding. By accepting the letters, the object of affection begins the consummation her suitor seeks.

In the fifth chapter, I move from the part letters play in early modern comedies to the part they play in tragedies by examining Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, a comedy that eschews the comic ending, and rests somewhere between the two types of drama. *Volpone* resists the happy ending of marriage, but it does not resist the use of letters as a sexual trope, even as it "dismant[es] cultural confidence in patrilineal descent."28 From Lady Would-be's promiscuous reading, to the parasitic violation of the text of Volpone's will, to the consensual rape of Celia, all writing is suspect. With every

---

opening—eyes, ears, mouth—subject to violation, honesty becomes an impossible construction to maintain.

The textual violations that inform Volpone carry over thematically to many tragedies. These dramas comment on the power of textual intercourse to penetrate bodies. Though not all texts are poisonous, all texts are penetrative and, like the "leprous distilment" poured into Old Hamlet's ear, can act upon the body in devastating ways. The published word, whether spoken, read, or written, becomes part of the physiological economy of author and audience. Renaissance drama reminds us of the way we internalize language and the power words have to alter their receivers fundamentally.

In tragedies from The Spanish Tragedy to The Duchess of Malfi to Hamlet, mishandled letters lead to tragedies as surely as having sex with the wrong person does. In fact, the exchange of ink between a man and a woman often prefigures a sexual liaison, or serves as evidence of impurity after the fact. Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet's letters is only one of many examples. As with sexual intercourse, written intercourse can miscarry, resulting in blood and violence. Bel-Imperia's desperate letter to Hieronimo, written in her own blood, provides one potent example. As in Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece, or as at the beginning of Hamlet, an oral text internalized leads to a humoral imbalance and a series of tragic inscriptions on paper and on bodies. This chapter examines the variety of written miscarriages and violations that drive many early modern tragedies to their bloody conclusions.

I also examine in this chapter the more grotesque mixtures of bodies and texts to literally lay bare the connection between the expression of words and the expression of
blood, tears, and other bodily fluids. For example, the disturbing image of the violated, maimed, and bleeding Lavinia tossing about a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to communicate her pain, then making figures in the dirt with her bloody stumps, brings the connection between anatomy and textual communication dramatically forward. Many of the goriest, most violent Renaissance dramas, including Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and others like John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, Thomas Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy*, and John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, engage in a grotesque exaggeration of the violence of earlier plays such as Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. These plays engage the same textual/sexual exchanges as appear in the more understated tragedies (and even in the comedies), but they take the communicative properties of the body to a violent and bloody extreme.

In these dramas, one finds the influence of humor theory and anatomy graphically displayed—faces eaten away by poison, letters written in blood, a parade of corpses, beating hearts impaled upon swords, and enemies murdered with the same knife meant to sharpen quills. In these tragedies, the pen dipped in the inkwell transforms into a sword dipped in poison, or a dramatic scene composed of corpses—spreading putrefaction to its audience. The penetrative qualities of the text come to the forefront, as characters die from contact with poisoned books, paintings, and pens. These plays quite literally anatomize the connection between texts and the body, between ink and putrefaction, and present stories designed to sicken and redeem, to purge and to heal through an extremity of blood.
CHAPTER 2

"BEAUTY'S REDDEST INK FOR HIM DOTH STIR:" SONNETEERS, SEXUALITY, AND

THE HUMORAL BODY

This pharmakon, this "medicine," this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence.

...The leaves of writing act as a pharmakon...

—Jacques Derrida, Plato's Pharmacy

Part I: Embodying the Petrarchan Sonnet

Lyrics and sonnets offered the best outlets for interpersonal humoral expression in the early modern period. As Nicholas Breton writes, in the opening dedication of his Melancholike Humours, his sonnets "are all waters of one spring: but they runne through many kinds of earth; whereof they give a kind of tang in their taste." Breton reinforces with this language the idea that his is not a book about melancholy humors but a work that is actually composed of them—a physical product to be tasted and ingested, rather than an abstract contemplation of sadness. The taking in of such a product would inevitably alter a reader's humoral state. As Michael Schoenfeldt notes, Renaissance scientists believed that diet and evacuation could influence the humors and their "concomitant behaviors." Medical interventions were designed to promote a healthy balance of the humors within the body. I propose that reading and writing were two particularly potent "concomitant behaviors"; the exchange of intimate, courtly writing in particular constituted a form of ingestion and purgation, functioning as "remedy and

2 Nicholas Breton, Melancholike Humours, (London: The Scholartis Press, 1929).
This humoral framework for writing gives rise to an especially physical poetics that sets English sonnets apart from their Italian ancestors in a variety of ways. For example, such a poetics transforms the traditional blazon of the mistress into an intimate examination of her humoral body. English sonnets continuously invoke (as in Sidney's "pregnant" opening sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella*) the physical compulsion to write, as they simultaneously describe the physical consequences of reading.

"Who so list to hunt," the best known of Sir Thomas Wyatt's Petrarchan adaptations, takes an experience of the poetic mistress as an elusive, ethereal being to be enjoyed from a distance, and re-fashions that experience into physical longing, a primal calling to hunt. What Wyatt does in this poem to embody (literally) the humoral experience of loving an unattainable woman demonstrates a much larger phenomenon at work in the lyrics of nearly all the well-known sonneteers who followed his example. Petrarch's speaker encounters his "doe of purest white" by chance, and becomes so fascinated that "he leaves all his work to follow her, / …like a miser who in search of treasure / with pleasure makes his effort bitterless" (190.1, 6-8). This speaker leaves his pleasant labor of poetry behind in order to capture a "moment on the verge of spiritual fulfillment." By contrast, Wyatt's speaker takes on a breathless, sexually charged persona—a man "wearied...so sore" (i.3) that he is on the verge of giving up.

The written hunt, as Stephen Foley explains, "figures sexual pursuit" and reveals the speaker's physical, sexual frustration. The speaker uses the poem itself as "a net...to

---

4 Ibid.
hold the wind” (i.8). Wyatt's "hind" is not the idealized, white, bejeweled vision of Petrarch, but a woman with another man's claim "graven with diamonds in letters plain / ...her fair neck round about." Wyatt's choice of the word "graven" implies a physical engraving, a bodily signal more deep and invasive than writing. It also evokes the Biblical notion of the graven image—a false idol, one not to be worshipped as a goddess. As Foley notes, Wyatt does not "idealize the woman, but figures her teasing sexuality, her intermittent signals of availability and denial." Wyatt's speaker is physically weakened, "wearied," "fainting"; he chases, and invites other men to chase, a force of nature, "wild for to hold," rather than an ephemeral vision. This hind may be frustratingly unavailable to the flushed, choleric speaker, but through the vehicle of the poem itself, he inscribes/engraves her as well. The love object of Wyatt's poem is no goddess, but contested community property.

The organic, wild construction of Wyatt's mistress perhaps arises from the fact that Petrarch and Wyatt were writing at cross-purposes. Petrarch wrote to admire, chastely, a married woman—to express himself in a way that emphasized her inaccessibility. He writes seeking not only Laura, but also laurels, the public recognition of his skills as a practitioner of vernacular poetry. And later, of course, after Laura's death, Petrarch writes to memorialize her—to engrave her name along with his own in an historic manner. This is poetry of soulful, rather than carnal, communion that celebrates Laura's earthly beauty by sublimating it into a marble memorial. Wyatt, on the other hand, writes to express himself within an intimate coterie of other writers. His

7 Ibid., 98.
8 Ibid., 99. This is one way, perhaps, that a humoral reading helps resolve the "contradictory Christian frame of reference" of this poem that Foley observes.
9 Ibid., 98.
work would have "circulated in the Henrician court, gathered, for example with the work of other individuals in [a collection] associated with five courtly women and their lovers" — to show himself a skilled courtier/practitioner, yes, but also to touch a particular woman (often assumed to be Anne Boleyn) intimately, a woman perilously close to him and to others within the court, especially "Caesar." Writing, like the other sports practiced at Henry VIII's court, was a clash of wills freighted with physicality, arising from some rather basic human needs. The object of Wyatt's poetic affection was very much alive — her physical availability a pawn in an intimate courtly game, as Catherine Bates has written, "a teasing blend of jest and earnest…in which the woman is quarry in the sexual chase and circulates as an object of homosocial desire," yet is "no passive pawn." Passive pawns had a brief shelf life within Henry VIII's court. Petrarch was a poet's poet, a genteel statesman and clergyman who found himself conflicted about the urges of his body. Wyatt, a warrior-statesman, like his immediate successors Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and Sir Philip Sidney, was familiar with the power of a single word to sway the temperament of a humorous monarch, with potentially severe physical consequences. Wyatt's poems arise from the body and from the need to sway other bodies. The poems seek to invade others within the intimate circle of the court. Wyatt, like Surrey and other early modern sonneteers, infused the Petrarchan tradition with humoral intimacy that arose from courtly closeness. They expressed manuscripts of

---


tears, blood, bile, and spirit that connected bodies rather than sublimating them in a more typical, neo-Platonist way.

This crucial constitutive difference between the contents of Petrarch's poems and those of the English sonneteers reflects contemporary attitudes about the process of handwriting. Writing could both express and create humoral conditions. Edward Cocker, in his handwriting manual *The Pen's Triumph*, attributes the round beauty of the Italian hand to the fact that "the Italians are generally more airy than we." However, he does believe that "though the *Alpes* stand betwixt them and us," with practice, English writers may enable this hand to "thrive in our Climate, and become serviceable." In other words, intense physical practice, akin to mountain climbing in Cocker's opinion, could enable the English writer to out-Italicize the Italians despite their airy predispositions. Petrarch's white doe certainly appears (and disappears) in an airy fashion, unlike Wyatt's hind. The mistress in "Whoso List to Hunt" may be hard to catch, like air in a net, but she is "wild for to hold." This is a tangible mistress who, though wild, can in fact be held. She is as concrete, as embraceable, as the pen that writes of her. That pen serves as an equally tangible extension of the poet's body. Cocker spends over twenty pages advising writers of the proper composition not only of ink, but also of the body in relation to desk, paper, and quill. He gives detailed instructions, a half page in fact, on the placement of the thumb and fingers around the quill. He also describes the proper body posture and placement relative to the writing surface. He advises that one keep his breast off of the writing table, and his nose off the paper, in order to assume "as

---

majestical a posture as [he] can."14 The texts arising from this intensely physical process served as an expression of the writer's state of mind, and not just in the abstract sense of the term. Whatever humor might predominate in a writer's disposition, and whatever climatic, national, or emotional conditions obtain, would be expressed through pen and ink. Wyatt's poetry, specifically, showcases the way such conditions bleed into a writer's work. Wyatt adds physical force, "Alpine difficulties" to the "airiness" of his Italian predecessors because of this humoral mode of expression.

Just as the word "express" unites the physical and metaphorical qualities of writing, the word "composition" works polysemously to link writing and the body. In early modern usage, a composition referred to both a piece of writing or art and to "mental constitution, or constitution of mind and body combined."15 No wonder then, that Cocker illustrates his manual with cherubs, men, and animals, all skillfully composed of quill strokes—a showy, ornate example of "humour[ing] [one's] letters according to the most pleasing fashion."16 Cocker literally creates (composes) bodies of ink to demonstrate his facility as a writer, just as Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, and Shakespeare compose the literary bodies of their mistresses, filtering their airy Italian predecessors through a distinctly English writing process, a process that emerged from the physical proximity and danger of Henrician courtly life.

Surrey's sonnet "From Tuscan cam my ladies worthi race" exemplifies just such a humoral hybrid—the Italian blended with the English to create a mistress of flesh and blood. Like the Petrarchan conceit from which the poem springs, Surrey's Geraldine

14 Ibid., 4-7
15 See "composition n." in Oxford English Dictionary online.
16 Cocker. The Pen's Triumph, 21.
originates in Italy—in addition to the broader region of Tuscany, the poem notes, "Faire Florence was sometime her auncient seate" (9.1-2). From there, Surrey's speaker endows his Geraldine with a variety of humoral characteristics: "lyvely heate" from "the westorne ile," (Wales) that surely contributes to her healthy "bryght...hew," along "mylke of Irishe brest" for her early nourishment. Blood appears as well, in the form of "princes bloud" on her mother's side. Once the speaker composes this international feast of a body, the tone becomes, once again, more Petrarchan and abstract in the final couplet, "Bewty of kind, her vertues from above; / Happy ys he that may obtaine her love" (9.13-14). However, according to W.A. Sessions, this is merely a "Neoplatonic charade" to add a polite finish to what is essentially an advertisement for a marriageable young woman. Sessions argues that any sexual heat between Surrey and his Geraldine, Lady Elizabeth Garret, has been manufactured over the centuries as part of Surrey's particular literary mythology. I would argue, however, that even as Surrey promotes Geraldine's physical attributes for someone else's benefit, he creates her body in a series of humoral tropes that mark her out as his own, if not in life, at least in the poetry that arises from it.

Critical writing about the English sonnet abounds with observations about the way Wyatt and Surrey layer the Petrarchan sonnets they adapt with overt physicality, yet the explanations for the phenomenon generally turn to the translation problems between Italian and English, or to the construction of poetic "irony, innuendo, and

---


ambiguity,\textsuperscript{19} not to a uniquely English conception of writing as a physical, humoral process. For example, Elizabeth Heale, in a discussion of Wyatt's "Love and Fortune and my mind, rememb'rer" notes that Wyatt's choice of the word "rememb'rer," with its connotations of "dismemberment and fragmentation" and "bringing severed limbs back together," adds a physical sensibility "not in the original Italian."\textsuperscript{20} I would argue that Wyatt exchanges an image of steel for Petrarch's diamonds and "brickle glass...dashed into dust" for Petrarch's more abstract "thoughts [broken] in half" precisely because they better reflect the physical approach of an English poet. Wyatt and Surrey both composed their poetry within the environs of a notoriously perilous court, a court in which literal "dismemberment and fragmentation" were not uncommon. Wyatt, presumably, addressed at least one sonnet, "Whoso list to hunt" to a living, breathing mistress who became a victim of just such a dismemberment. In the context of the Henrician court, Surrey's "re-membering" of Wyatt after Wyatt's death, takes on a literal dimension. His elegy blazons Wyatt in a way, remarking on his tongue, eye, heart, and finally, on his "valiant Corpse, where force and beauty met."\textsuperscript{21} Surrey himself was beheaded, his final poem being "a fragment that resembles a Petrarchan sonnet" composed shortly before his death.\textsuperscript{22} The poem pointedly engages the idea of blood, describing "the cureless wound that bleedeth day and night," that the poet sees when he looks in the mirror in the days before his execution, and his "blood that hath so oft


\textsuperscript{20} Heale, \textit{Wyatt, Surrey and Early Tudor Poetry}, 97-99.


\textsuperscript{22} Sessions, \textit{Henry Howard the Poet Earl of Surrey}, 385-387.
been shed / For Britain's sake" (13, 16-17). As Sessions notes, Surrey's speaker mourns the end of his own aristocratic bloodline, while simultaneously expressing fear and anger about the blood that will flow from his body upon his execution. This is poetry that arises from the adrenaline rush of an embattled body and mind, and would "textualize the scream" of such circumstances, through a purgative, humoral poetics.

Whether the topic was love, lust, or death, the early "makers" of English sonnets sought to exhibit "the ability and power to shape material from the natural or social world and to make something that was useful, beautiful, and relevant." In the same way that the body was believed to refine food, air, and other environmental factors into blood and humors, and a writer combined environmental materials (oak galls, rainwater, goose quills) to practice his craft, the poet took a diet of raw materials and transformed them into a text. The poet's objective was to rebalance his own humors and to perhaps create a lustful imbalance within his beloved. Unlike the sublimation and elevation of the donna that characterizes the Petrarchan sonnets, English sonneteers infuse both the beloved and their environment with a raw physicality. A particular authorial consciousness of the bodily origins and effects of courtly poetry differentiates the English sonnet tradition from its Petrarchan forebears, "out-Italianing" the Italian, as Cocker might have put it, thus highlighting the power ink could wield over the body.

---

23 Bullet, ed., *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century*, 144.
25 Ibid., 385.
Part II: Body Compositions

My objective for the rest of this chapter is to narrow the focus from the exaggerated physicality in the early modern English sonnet tradition generally to the fertile domain of the humoral exchange between the poet and his mistress more specifically. The intimacy inherent in exchanges of lyric manuscripts informed the way an audience would have received them, whether that audience was the mistress herself, a coterie of courtly acquaintances, or the reading audience of a published sonnet cycle. Romantic attachment, sexuality, and gender norms all inform the potential physical effects of reading and writing poetry. Wyatt, Surrey, and Sidney pioneered a particularly humoral understanding of the relationship between a writer, his mistress, and his coterie audience. The title quotation for this chapter, "Beauty's reddest ink Venus for him doth stir," from Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* demonstrates the close alliance between ink and the rush of blood that occurs upon sight of one's object of affection. In the same poem, Sonnet 102, Sidney refers to "Galen's adoptive sons" (102.8) the humors, and blames them for causing pallor in his mistress. He then absolves them, blaming Eros instead for "mak[ing] his paper perfect white" (102.12), the better for him to add Venus's red ink and denote Stella's real affections.²⁸ Sidney, throughout *Astrophil and Stella*, particularly in this sonnet, brings together humoral medicine, writing, and reading in a way that reflects their close association in early modern thought generally, and in the sonnet tradition specifically.

The physical effects of love, lust, melancholy, choler, could all arise from reading, and be purged through the vessel of the quill and inkwell. As Bruce Smith observes,

---
sonneteers like Sidney were writing to a specific, close-knit audience, "the gentlemen of the Inns of Court." These poems were to be circulated among a distinct, familiar social group, "poised between youth and manhood," a group which "cultivated two very disparate modes" of poetic discourse—"the courtly love-lyrics of Petrarch and the sexy elegies of Ovid." The English sonnet tradition fused these two modes. English sonneteers added a distinct physicality to their love objects and guiding imagery because of the close cultural association between writing and the humoral body. Smith's central concern is the homosexual content of these poems, but my concern in this chapter is the conflation of ink and the poetic love object (whether male or female) with bodily fluids. Sonnet sequences circulated such fluids between social intimates, thereby creating a culturally loaded conversation, or as Heale describes it in her discussion of Wyatt's sonnets, a "fertile semiosis." The English sonnets signify in a physical way that belies their Petrarchan/neo-Platonist origins. Part of this signification arises from the physicality of handwriting itself, and part from the intimate circumstances of their composition.

The word "conversation" commonly connotes sexual intercourse in early modern usage, a connotation that applies to the reception of an author's writings. When two courtly gentlemen share the production and reading of love poetry or drama, they come

---

30 Ibid., 102-103.
32 "Sexual intercourse or intimacy" is the third definition in the *OED*, with instances cited in 1511, 1594, and 1649, one of which includes *Richard III*. 

28
together physically and rhetorically. 33 Certainly the ongoing critical discussion of Shakespeare's Young Man sonnets and the homoeroticism therein, which I discuss later in this chapter, demonstrates the way an intimate exchange of ink can signify a physical interaction. Whether a critic espouses the view that the sonnets demonstrate Shakespeare's particular sexuality, or takes Stephen Booth's point of view that "Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter," the need to address the physicality of the sonnets remains. 34 Sexual interpretations of Shakespeare's sonnets, or any others, often rely on the biography of the poet and his poetic object. For example, readers may choose to believe that Sidney was writing about his love for Penelope Rich in *Astrophil and Stella*, or Shakespeare was expressing homosexual desire for Henry Wriothesly or William Herbert, or some other attractive young man. However, regardless of biography, homosexuality, or heterosexuality, the inescapable sensuality of the writing and publishing process itself is what gives sonnets their sexual energy.

In a world defined by humor theory, when a poet directs amorous poetry to a woman, he does not merely control her body figuratively, as Nancy Vickers argues, but also physically. 35 Vickers acknowledges that the poetic "scattering" or dismemberment of Petrarch's Laura arises from a need to "perpetuate her image and forget it," a need to "cry out with paper and ink," (RS 71.23 36). However, she focuses on the way the poem

---


36 Ibid., 270.
renders the mistress "corporeally scattered" and the poet "emotionally scattered," and how these disembodied figures become "no more than a collection of imperfect signs."  

She acknowledges a "textual commingling" between lover and beloved, and makes note of the way Petrarch compares his poetry (negatively) to Jupiter's inseminating shower of gold. While Laura's scattered body has the power to inseminate the poet with a need to write, his "re-membering" of Laura cannot make her accessible to him. The "scattered woman" of Petrarch's poetry remains a monument, a collection of jewel-like parts gleaming against the snow.

An English sonneteer, by contrast, uses the blazon to create a recognizable physical whole. He embodies his mistress in order to violate her. The poem works not to scatter, but to gather parts into a susceptible target for the hunt. Self-conscious references to ink, writing, and paper pervade this poetry because "textual commingling" and sexual commingling are culturally indistinct. No matter for whom the sonneteer writes, the poetry itself constitutes intimacy, even if a physical consummation never occurs. The poem violates the body of the beloved as both a surrogate for the poet, and as a prelude to sexual penetration. Therefore, a woman who accepts poetry or letters from a man allows a transgressive penetration of her chaste body. The sonnets enable intimate conversation rather than sublimating it. As Lady Mary Wroth, the only published female sonneteer of the period laments, the poetic suitor "may [her] fortune write/ In embers of that fire which ruind [her]" (P31.10-11).  

The early modern lyric tradition  

---

37 Ibid., 265-79.
38 Ibid., 267-68.
predicates itself upon an interpenetrative relationship between the written word and the body that resonates most strongly in the exchange of writing between men and women.

For example, exchanges of melancholy written texts in *Hamlet* demonstrate the physically penetrative qualities of such compositions. When Polonius seeks assurances of Ophelia's chastity despite Hamlet's overtures toward her, Ophelia defends her honor, insisting that she "did repel his letters and denied / His access to [her] (2.1.111-112)." Ophelia equates the repulsion of a man's writing with the rejection of that man's body. Polonius also construes Hamlet's written advances as sexual advances. When he voices his concerns about the burgeoning relationship to Queen Gertrude, he reads Hamlet's love poetry aloud to underscore the potential seriousness of their flirtation. Ironically, by orally publishing Hamlet's odes on Ophelia's beauty, Polonius himself performs the very violation he tries to prevent. Polonius advertises his daughter's virtue even as he makes public the words—poems in the Petrarchan mode—designed to compromise it. A sexually charged transfer of texts occurs in this incident and in others throughout the play that exemplifies an affective relationship between text and body typical of the early modern period.

Unlike the Petrarchan poetry that influenced it, the English sonnet engaged with the bodies of the mistress and the poet in overtly physical ways. Heale has noted that Surrey takes Petrarch's "a la matura etate od a l'acerba" (in maturity or youth), and changes the sentiment to "loste yowthe, or when my heares be grey." This is not a mere Anglicization of the language, but an example of the way English sonneteers

---


move from the more abstract observations of the Italian poetry into concrete bodily language—not just "age," but "when my heares be grey." Surrey chooses to represent age through the prism of the body, and this is no coincidence. Rather, this choice clearly illustrates the physicality of the English sonnet—one that derives, at least in part, from the close association between the written word and the body. T.S. Eliot in "The Metaphysical Poets" observes that Sidney's "look in thy heart and write" from *Astrophil and Stella*, does not "look deep enough" into the body to encapsulate the physicality of the poetic process. Eliot engages a different, more modern, paradigm of the body, one altogether more divisive and binary. He insists that, "one must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts." However, Sidney himself looks just that deeply in his own *Defence of Poesy*, calling poetry "that first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled [scholars] to feed afterward of tougher knowledges," and "food for the tenderest stomachs." Sidney, along with Wyatt and Surrey, invented the poetic process that Eliot describes, a process that distills the humors of the body into ink on the page.

Although it still concerns the heart, perhaps Eliot would have preferred a more graphic version of Sidney's "reddest ink," like that which Spenser includes in the *Faerie Queen*, "Figuring straunge characters of his art, / With living bloud he those characters wrate, / Dreadfully dropping from her dying hart" (III.xii.31). Busyrane's dark verses in violent pursuit of Amoret highlight the corporeal nature of love poetry. These verses exemplify poetry that arises from lust, issuing directly from the body to the page. Lisa

---

Klein quotes these lines to foreground a discussion of Spenser's revisions of Petrarch in the *Amoretti*. She argues that Spenser revises the Petrarchan form to allow for the physical expression of Christian marital sexuality. I agree that Spenser's poems "embody the conflict between the claims of the spirit and those of the flesh" and that they present, renounce and re-present the mistress.\(^4\) I would add that what Spenser does in the *Amoretti* is not unique to him, however. The fleshly desires expressed in his poetry have as much to do with the physicality of the English poetic tradition as with the promotion of female sexual submission in marriage.

Tracking the English sonnet tradition reveals the physical consequences that an exchange of ink between two intimates can yield. Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare created poetic bodies of living, breathing sexuality. Examining the lyrics and sonnets of these authors reveals the degree to which pen and ink figure themselves as extensions of the male body, and therefore the extent to which the reception of poetry by a woman amounts to a reception of, not only the male seed, but of whatever humoral condition happens to afflict the suitor/poet. In some cases, textual exchange even results in procreation; when it does not, the exchange still involves a physical violation and the attendant physical consequences. When a suitor or sonneteer assails his mistress with handwritten words on a page, or verses read aloud, he invades her body just as surely as if he were to have sexual intercourse with her.\(^5\) However, the transaction between the sonneteer and his object of desire is far more multivalent than a simple, sexual exchange. A sonneteer mines the fluids of his own humoral body to


create his verses. Perhaps this is why Ophelia’s acceptance of Hamlet’s letters and poetry not only facilitates a sexual violation of her chaste body, but seems to infect her with the qualities of Hamlet’s melancholy madness. This irrevocable change in her humoral composition leads to her demise. The interpenetrative nature of words and bodies creates a situation in which the publication of a woman’s chastity is a risky enterprise, almost always resulting in her destruction.

Once again Wyatt's lyric poetry offers an early case in point. He builds images of the body into his poetry that refigure the abstract, Petrarchan beloved as a physical being—not of alabaster, pearls, or gold, but of flesh and blood. Wyatt writes poetry with a pulse, the iambic drumming of a metaphoric heart, crafting the literary anatomy of the female love object. Wyatt's love poetry penetrates the beloved, even as she continues to resist his advances. One sonnet in particular, "I abide and abide," (10) exemplifies the poem-as-body metaphor.46 Wyatt writes the poem so as to give it the life that he finds missing in his unresponsive mistress. The repetition of the word abide, with its insistent b sounds on the emphasized syllables, gives the poem a lifelike pulse as it is read aloud. In each line the dominant b sounds are followed by d's, b-d, b-d, b-d. The lines surrounding those that contain abide, have d sounds embedded, as in "And after the old proverb, the happy day, / And ever my lady to me doth say" (12.2-3)47 The result is a heartbeat at the middle of the poem—the speaker's throbbing desire crafted into poetic life. He depicts a poetic substitute for the physical female body, one subject to the power of his pen.

47 Ibid. (emphasis mine)
Similarly, in Wyatt's epigram, "Who hath heard of such cruelty before?" the speaker and his beloved engage in mutual poetic creation that is both metaphorical and biological. The craft of love that the woman practices on the poet becomes the craft of needlework, "...she cruel more and more, / Wished each stitch, as she did sit and sew, / Had pricked mine heart, for to increase my sore" (12.4-5). The speaker of the poem transforms himself into a sampler upon which the beloved sews. Her art, needlework, penetrates the speaker just as he intends his poem to penetrate her. Like the poet himself, the mistress invades her lover's body, sewing inscriptions on his heart (12.7). But just as the beloved gains the power to violate the speaker, he uses his pen to reverse the situation, "She pricked hard, and made herself to bleed" (12.8). The power of penetration thus remains where it belongs, with the male pen. The poem preserves the conceit that the requisite heat for creation, artistic or physical, resides with men, not women. Wyatt's speaker thus elevates himself at the expense of his mistress. Her body becomes a permeable ground, the wax awaiting the figurative seal of the poem, not an unassailable fortress. The poem ends not with sublimated desire in the Petrarchan mode, but with blood, the biological evidence of conquest. Wyatt leaves his beloved "pricked" and bleeding, firmly rooted in the physical realm.

Following suit, Surrey uses poetry to penetrate the apparently chaste body of his beloved. For example, in his love lyric 11, Surrey complains of his mistress's "froosyn hart" (11.10), and compliments her chastity, but by the end of the poem hopes that "this

48 Ibid.
50 de Grazia, "Imprints: Shakespeare, Gutenberg, and Descartes," 29-58.
carefull song / Prynt in your hert some percell of my will" (11.50-51). The beams of her chaste eyes may have penetrated his heart, but he ends the lyric by penetrating her eyes and ears with his song, insinuating himself physically. The word "will" bears a range of meanings, connoting not just the abstract "desire," but lust, and the male genitalia. The poet here does not just express his will, but *imprints* it, a choice of metaphor that engages both biological and textual violations. By imprinting his will on her heart, Surrey's speaker has already performed the sexual act that his beloved resists. Similarly, in lyric 12, the speaker promotes his beloved's virtue with a comparison to "Penelope the fayre," and insists that the woman's honesty is such "As it by writing sealed were" (12.8, 10). She is so chaste that her virtue exceeds anything he "with pen [has] skill to showe" (12.11-12). The very existence of this poem detailing her chastity, however, is a tribute to the skill of his pen to invade her body. Surrey's speaker undercuts his beloved's virtue even as he extols it.

All of Wyatt and Surrey's poetic violations of virtuous mistresses result in their mistresses' ruination but never in procreation. The penetrative discourse of these poems triangulates male potency, however, and enables the two poets, in conversation with one another, to beget a poetic child that circumvents the womb. Indeed, Wyatt and Surrey beget the English lyric tradition on the refigured bodies of their mistresses. They forge biological and metaphorical bodies that inform the poetry to follow. Notably, the language of physical reproduction infiltrates critical discussion of Wyatt and Surrey. For example, W.A. Sessions' article "Surrey's Wyatt," is full of common biological tropes for

---

the creation of the written word, such as "conception of honor," "the 'labor' of his making," "the moment of origin," and so forth.\textsuperscript{53} Such language certainly reflects the physical sensibility of the poetry Sessions analyzes. In his elegy on Wyatt, Surrey himself describes Wyatt's poetic process as physical labor, "Hammers beat still in that lively brain / As on a stith." The poem illustrates the way each part of Wyatt's body contributes to this process: brain, tongue, eye, hand, heart. Surrey's language highlights the interpenetrative nature of Wyatt's body and works. The tongue "enflame[s]" other hearts to virtuous action while the eye has a "piercing look" (l.17-18, 21, 23). Furthermore, as I note earlier, the poem ends with a "valiant corps," a fully realized poetic body that never quite leaves the biological body behind (29). No wonder, then, that the final stanza fleshes out the Petrarchan "jewel we have lost" with a vision of bones in earth (l. 37-38). Overlapping terms that describe both the poetic process and the processes of biological creation and destruction persist to this day. This way of thinking about poems and bodies finds its origin, at least in the English tradition, with Wyatt and Surrey.

Subsequent makers of the English poetic canon, notably Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare, continue to write poetry in the physical mode that Wyatt and Surrey establish in their works, and the power of the written word moves explicitly from the penetrative to the reproductive. Sidney, fashioning himself an aggressive warrior-statesman like Wyatt and Surrey before him, channels the anxieties of trying to rise at court; however, the change in gender of his monarch presents a new set of difficulties for English poetry in the Petrarchan mode. As Curtis Perry has observed, "because her

most intimate chamber service had to be performed by women…Elizabeth avoided the kind of institutionalized intimacy that featured so prominently in the factionalism of the Henrician court.”

The creation of fictions through poetry and drama was one of the only ways to gain access to the female monarch, so courtly poets engaged the body of the queen literally. Though Elizabeth’s court lacked the aggressive hyper-masculine competition of the Henrician court, it still provided plenty of physical anxiety and humoral material for its gentleman poets. As with the Henrician court, much of this anxiety arose from concerns about royal reproduction, combined with complicated, often contradictory rules of feminine propriety, "a dangerous tightrope…between wit and scandal." Sidney wrote in the context of a court in which male courtiers, too, had to walk a fine line of gendered behavior, as contemporary conduct manuals such as Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* suggest. Rather than resulting in more sublimated, Platonic verse like that of Petrarch, however, the intricacies of court behavior led to an ever more graphic and complex physicality of the written word as it passed between men and women.

The first sonnet of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, invokes a metaphor of pregnancy. Astrophil describes himself as "great with child to speak" (1.12), and the rhetorical progression of the sonnet to that crucial point, just before the final couplet, reveals a physical interchange between paper, ink, brain, and body. Astrophil hopes to engender pleasure enough in Stella to "cause her read," because "reading might make

---


55 Ibid., 112-113.


her know” (1.3). In other words, he will create enough heat to open her eyes to his poetry, which will then enter her body to create a state of "knowing" in her brain. This textual interaction echoes Laqueur's description of Aristotelian models of conception as "the male [having] an idea, an artistic or artisanal conception, in the brain-uterus of the female." For conception to occur, the man had to create enough physical heat within the cold, phlegmatic female body to cause an orgasm and a spark of life force. Astrophil elaborates on the idea of reading as a physical act when he describes himself as "turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow / Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain" (1.7-8). Here, he presents himself as undergoing the literary insemination he hopes to perpetrate upon Stella. The ink from the page creates "showers," an ejaculation of fluid that is also "fruitful." The dry heat of his male brain will mix with the cold, wet showers of the text to form a poem. The penetration of Astrophil's pen sparks an idea from these literary fluids. The vocabulary Astrophil uses here certainly explains his delicate condition by line 12, and prefigures the physical effect he hopes his pen and ink will have on his beloved. Sidney's speaker thus allies his poetry immediately with the process of making (composing) a human body, thus inaugurating an idea that permeates the entire sequence. With Astrophil, Sidney takes the physical aspects of Wyatt and Surrey's poems one step further. Astrophil's poetry seeks not only to "re-member" the body of his beloved, but also to grow an idea within her, in essence to procreate with the subject of his sonnets.

Sonnet 34 of *Astrophil and Stella* builds on the idea that literary exchanges are sexual, not just verbal, conversations. The sonnet takes the form of a dialogue—a

---

conversation—on the efficacy of writing as a prelude to or substitute for sex. Astrophil’s unnamed antagonist in this argument asks him "to what end" he would write, and while he answers "To ease / a burdened heart," the sexual connotations of the words "end" and "burden" hover beneath this simple question and answer (34.1-2). Later, the antagonist asks, "'Art not ashamed to publish thy disease?'" (34.5) The choice of the word "publish" in conjunction with a physical ailment, again connotes the relationship between the presentation of ink on paper and the state of the humors within the body of the poet. The poet's state of mind here anticipates the publication of Hamlet's supposed erotic melancholy through his letters to Ophelia—the publication of one's inner disease is a risky and potent endeavor. Astrophil insists that making his disease public, through the vehicles of ink, paper, and voice, will not shame him but "breed [his] fame" (34.6). Because Astrophil expels his lovesick humors as the pen expels the ink, he purifies himself while sullying his reluctant love object. Sidney's poetry pretends to elevate Stella, when it fact, it elevates its author at the expense of Stella's purity. For example, the verb "breed" blurs the distinction between the products of the word and the products of the body. The "poor loss" of ink that he will expend on the paper parallels the eventual release of his semen, or spirit, into her body (34.13). Such a release of ink may rebalance his temperament at the expense of Stella's Petrarchan virtue. He hopes his expense of ink will reveal "Stella's great powers" to his poetic audience, and perhaps, by invading her eyes and ears, his "inky loss" will translate into loss of another kind for her.

Sidney's evocation of his own prowess at the expense of his lady's virtue highlights the gendered nature of early modern poetic exchanges. As with actual sexual
intercourse, poetic intercourse involves different and more serious consequences for women than for men. Astrophil details an expense of spirit to capture Stella's maidenhead in the fourth song of the sequence. The song makes the poem's audience voyeurs to a present-tense private encounter between Astrophil and his mistress, as he tries to talk her into having sex with him. Throughout this poem, Astrophil frames his sexual advances in metaphors of speaking and writing. Though Stella's refrain, "'No, no, no, no, my dear, let be,'" offers a consistent linguistic barrier against Astrophil's attempts on her virtue, the progression of the metaphors seem to indicate a certain amount of success on the suitor's part. In the first stanza, Astrophil begs Stella to let his "whispering voice obtain / Sweet reward for sharpest pain" (Fourth Song, 3-4). He imagines his voice violating her body as a precursor to his will. The penetration of the voice will "obtain" the "sweet reward" of conquest even as it forwards the "sharp pain" of Stella's loss of virginity. Astrophil moves from the ears to the nose and eyes in the third stanza of his entreaty. The "sweet flowers on fine bed too / Us in their best language woo" (15-16). The flowers on the bed, with their beauty and sweet odor, must affect Stella as their particular language infiltrates her body, and with any luck, tilt her humoral balance in favor of love. By the seventh stanza, Astrophil invokes the potent metaphors of ink and paper to assert himself at the prime moment, as Stella's "mother is abed" (Fourth Song, 7). According to Astrophil, Stella's mother "thinks [Stella] does letters write," and so has no idea what the two of them might be doing.

Astrophil figures letter-writing as a private, bedroom activity, and rightly so. Stella's mother should perhaps be more suspicious of her inky activities, especially as Astrophil himself encourages her to "Write, but first let me endite" (Fourth Song, 40). He
wants her to go ahead and perform the physical action of writing, but only after he has composed or "endited" the ideas and transmitted them to her. Again, the notion of the brain-uterus emerges; Astrophil succeeds in his literary penetration despite Stella's vigorous negative refrain. So the audience of Astrophil's song finds themselves privy to two types of conversation at once, one proper and courtly, the other quite the opposite. Sidney creates a humoral paradox. He venerates his mistress, yet heals his own humoral imbalance by infecting her with the written word. Once Stella accepts the verses, she accepts their humoral contents as well, the effects of which may cause an irreversible loss of purity.

The first sonnet of Spenser's *Amoretti* sequence echoes that of *Astrophil and Stella* in the way it depicts poetry springing from the depths of an imbalanced, lovesick body and seeking a brain-uterus in which to multiply. Petrarchan convention calls for the opening sonnet to set forth the ideas contained throughout the sequence. Spenser's Sonnet 1 performs that function in two ways. First, the poem introduces the fungible fluids that go into the creation of the sequence. Second, it broaches the idea that the poet's objective is to put the leaves of writing directly into his lover's hands, thus passing on his humoral imbalance to her. Spenser imagines his mistress reading "the sorrowes of [his] dying spright, / Written with teares in harts close bleeding book" (1: 7-8). "Dying spright" can refer, of course, to the abstract idea of "spirit"; however, the word "spright" in early modern usage often refers to "the masculine animal spirits, expelled in the semen (cf. Shakespeare's sonnet 129 'Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame')."\(^{59}\)

Three bodily fluids—tears, blood, spirit—all composed of and distilled from the humors,

come together in this sonnet and flow forth through the medium of ink. Spenser imagines his mistress holding the leaves containing his words and thereby taking in all the fluids that afflict him. By transmitting his excess humor to her, he engages her body literally as well as poetically.

Sonnet 2 takes the transmission of fluids even further by giving the poet's lovelorn thoughts the ability to breed and multiply. Like Sidney, Spenser's guiding concept is that of being "great with child to speak." His "Unquiet thought, whom at the first [he] bred / Of the'inward bale of [his] love pinéd hart" feeds on itself until it has grown "greater then [his] wombe." Then, rather grotesquely, the verbal children of his lovesickness break forth "lyke to vipers brood," eating their way through his body onto the page (2:1-6). The poet's hopes for these "humour'd letters" are that his mistress accept them after they "grace for [him] intreat" (2:12), thereby guaranteeing him life, and the potential for offspring. Failing her acceptance, those thoughts, like the spirits from which they derive, "will perish" (2:14). Unfortunately, once his mistress accepts those thoughts and validates them, her "goodly temperature" which he so admires in Sonnet 13 will be irredeemably compromised (13:4). His humorous verse will necessarily upset her equilibrium, and must do so in order for him to achieve his goal of physical conquest. In the Amoretti, the verses "lay incessant battery to her heart" in order to bring a neoplatonic ideal into the real, sexual world of Christian marriage (14:10). The mistress must "his leaf and love embrace" (28:14), and thereby fulfill her role as a wife, descending into the "lothsome and forlorne" fluctuations of the body and the "drossy slime" of sex and motherhood (13: 11-12). In Spenser's sonnets, a physical, humoral

60 Klein, ""Let us love, deare love, lyke as we ought,"" 116.
paradox replaces the Petrarchan paradox, which ties Laura’s desirability to her chaste aloofness. Just as the Petrarchan mistress becomes disqualified as a feminine ideal once she gives in to her suitor, the English mistress becomes earthbound, physically unbalanced, possibly even pregnant, as a result of her acceptance of her suitor’s verse and his body. Spenser certainly re-imagines the Petrarchan mistress as a wife, but in doing so he is also taking part in a tradition of English sonneteering that consistently invokes the humoral body as its source and subject.

Part III: Shakespeare's Bodies of Verse

Both Sidney and Spenser unite text and sex explicitly and boldly, setting a precedent that Shakespeare, the best-known sonneteer of the tradition, follows and expands upon. Shakespeare’s main innovation is to take the interrogation of the Petrarchan mistress that Wyatt and Surrey began, and to apply it to the poetic speaker. Sidney does this to a degree, with his "sunburnt brain" and "tears pour[ing] out ink," (1.8, 6.10). Astrophil is mightily conflicted and afflicted, but never feminized in the way Shakespeare allows his speaker to be. Shakespeare's speaker admits to lustful affliction and sensual appetites that an early modern person would have recognized as feminine, even as his "pupil pen" carries out the stereotypically masculine expression of the amorous poet. The fact that his sonnets embrace both male and female objects of desire, confounding generations of critics in various ways, demonstrates a humoral, rather than a sexual trajectory. In ascribing the sonnets' gender ambiguities to the humoral qualities of ink, I do not mean to avoid (either "ingeniously" or "hysterically," as Margreta de Grazia has put it) the question of homosexuality or heterosexuality. I intend, rather, to show how a humoral reading of the sonnets, performed in light of the
Renaissance culture of manuscript and print circulation, upholds a "construal of the body and of the psyche" specific to the time and place of the sonnets' composition—a one-sex, one-text model.61

Reading Shakespeare's sonnets through the lens of ink and humors provides a new explanation for the ambiguous sexuality of the poems. As the poet's ink carries the dynamic humoral states of his body, Shakespeare's speaker takes on the affect of whichever gender suits the humoral moment of the text. Laqueur notes that people in the Renaissance "believed that humoral balances of the sexes differed along the axis of hot and cold, wet and dry, and that such differences had implications for anatomy as well as for behavior."62 Shakespeare's sonnets illustrate this axis and the consequences of movement along its length. The Young Man poems celebrate hot, dry masculinity and deride the "vile vial" of the female body.63 However, one side effect of indulging in lusty affection for another person (male or female) is the loss of essential masculine heat, which results in a melancholy, feminine constitution. Shakespeare's speaker does feminize his male love object in Sonnet 20, for example, by describing the Young Man's "woman's face" and "woman's heart," calling him the "master-mistress of my passion" (20.1-3). But ultimately, the speaker himself is the one who is womanish, "defeated," left with "nothing," at the mercy of the Young Man's considerable charms (20.11-12). By using ink to purge the coolness, the poet can regain a more masculine level of heat. He becomes the "master-mistress" he describes.

62 Laqueur, Making Sex, 112.
63 Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets, 141.
The process of writing works cyclically to unbalance and rebalance the poet's body. Stephen Booth notes that Sonnet 153 and Sonnet 154 both express "love's paradoxes...as miraculous perversions of the natural order of the four elements and the four humors." These final sonnets in the sequence capture this cycle of "perversions" neatly. Shakespeare's speaker uses the metaphor of Cupid's "heart-inflaming brand" heating a cool well with "heat perpetuall, / Growing a bath and healthful remedy / For men diseased" (154.2, 10-12). Cupid's brand releases heat into cool water, that water then becomes a warm bath to heal the unbalanced lover. However, the cure proves elusive for the speaker, who finds that, "Love's fire heats water, water cools not love" (154.14). Love's fire also heats the inkwell, yet seems not to heal the writer in the way he had hoped. The expense of ink cools the amorous poet, but in the end, the trajectory is circular. This poet completes a humoral cycle, and finds himself hot and lustful, the state in which he began his poetic treatment.

The sonnets demonstrate the way the reciprocal transfer of heat was considered necessary to maintain physical balance. They chronicle romantic heat transfer among three unbalanced individuals, all suffering the laying on of Cupid's brand. Because proper heat was also necessary to maintain masculinity or femininity according to cultural rules, the sonnets also describe (and bemoan) the unsettling fluidity of gender identity. As Laqueur argues, an overheated woman who took on male social and sexual roles could suddenly become a man. He cites accounts from several Renaissance authors, including Baldesar Castiglione, Michel de Montaigne, and Charles IX's chief surgeon Ambroise Paré, of a young woman whose internal sex organs suddenly

---

64 Ibid., 536-537.
externalized themselves in response to an overheated puberty.\textsuperscript{65} Since nature tended toward perfection, which is to say, maleness, such a transformation could not work in reverse. However, a lustful male poet could certainly become temporarily feminized (left "to his purpose" with "nothing," to return to Sonnet 20) through an excess of melancholy as he expended his masculine energy on pining and poetry.

The more affection Shakespeare's poet expresses, the more he finds himself weakened and subject to the lesser attractions of his Dark Lady. Even before Sonnet 126, hints about the writer's vulnerability abound. For example, in 119, he describes himself as having drunk "potions…of siren tears / Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within" (119.1-2). Here, as in Edward Cocker's handwriting manual, appears once again the idea of writing as a distillation of a physical condition. The lovelorn weakness that drives the poet to write darkens, cools, and feminizes him. The writing that arose from such a cool body would be dark and womanly—how else to purge these unmanly humors and raise one's vital heat again? But, unfortunately for the poet, "We sicken to shun sickness when we purge," and he finds himself once again lustful and inflamed (118.4). Shakespeare's sonnets reinforce the idea that writing and reading were construed as physical, humoral processes. In these poems, "the metaphorical and the corporeal are so bound up with one another that the difference between the two is really one of emphasis rather than kind."\textsuperscript{66} The inked vicissitudes of Shakespeare's sonnet cycle result record the ebb and flow of humors within the body. They demonstrate the purgation and contagion that the pen and printing press enable.

\textsuperscript{65} Laqueur, \textit{Making Sex}, 126-127.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 109.
While many critical readings of the sonnets, such as Joel Fineman's, identify a neoplatonic "downward progression" from master to mistress in the sequence, thinking about these poems as inked expressions of humoral conditions makes the male/female binary unnecessary to their interpretation. I view the sonnets more like Michael Schoenfeldt does, as a chronicle of humoral flux. However, Schoenfeldt, too, sees a binary to be reconciled within the sonnets—that between body and soul, the weakness of the flesh and Christian temperance. My reading of the sonnets diverges here because I view them as a continuous act of written expression rather than a bifurcated attempt to reconcile maleness and femaleness, or sickness and health, or lust and love. Shakespeare's sonnets embrace the spectrum of humoral conditions inherent in love, and pointedly defy such binary considerations in the same way that the human body does. Reading the sonnets in this way aligns them not only more accurately with the "noted inconsistencies of Galenic medicine," but also with the one-sex model of anatomy that Thomas Laqueur describes. Shakespeare's sonnets present the speaker, the Young Man and the Dark Lady "according to their degree of metaphysical [im]perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos is male." In other words, the speaker of the sonnets is a fluid entity that may be more masculine or more feminine, depending on the particular imbalance he is expressing at any given poetic moment.

The shift within the sonnets, generally agreed to occur at Sonnet 126, from a masculine object of admiration to a female object of admiration, represents not only a

---

67 Schoenfeldt, Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England, 74-95.
68 Ibid., 77.
69 Laqueur, Making Sex, 5-6. Note that the substitution of the word "imperfection" for Laqueur's word, "perfection," is mine, relevant to the human imperfections on display in the sonnets.
change in the object of desire, but also a fundamental change in the speaker himself. Shakespeare's sonnets to a young, male object of desire work out sexual, which is to say humoral, conflict on the page. His sonnets to the Dark Lady do the same—as the speaker of the sonnets expresses more of himself, the content becomes dark and feminine, and the ink composes an entirely different sort of body. Shakespeare changes the mistress into a master (and back again). The speaker in the Dark Lady sonnets has fallen victim to the humoral flux of "lust in action" (129.2). As Michael Schoenfeldt observes, Sonnet 129 "explores with clinical precision and pathological disgust the madness pervading the available physiology of sexual desire and corporeal satisfaction." In other words, 129 brings the humoral body in direct and not altogether desirable contact with the Platonic ideal of the Petrarchan mistress. "What happens when you get what you want" is a lustful weakening of the hot, masculine humors in favor of the feminine weaknesses of lust and melancholy.

The speaker's poetry grows darker and more flawed as he achieves consummation with his object. The ink he expends ("in a waste of shame") changes the speaker and his perspective because it amounts to a consummation, not "devoutly to be wished, but rather a nightmare that cannot be avoided." As he writes and expresses more and more of himself, the speaker becomes more melancholy, more unbalanced, and more feminine. Galen described the tripartite Platonic soul as being divided into the

70 The shift from the Young Man to the Dark Lady is probably not quite this clear cut, as both Margreta de Grazia and Heather Dubrow have argued. However, this vagueness works in favor of my argument that the sonnets' gender ambiguity reflects humoral ambiguity. See Heather Dubrow, "Sidney, Shakespeare, Wroth," in Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 122-123.

71 Schoenfeldt, Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England, 82.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.
"rational," the "spirited," and the "desiderative." The expression of ink in the Young Man sonnets, may idealize the hotter, drier elements of the rational and spirited soul, but they still urge procreation with a woman. The Young Man sonnets, too, express "lust in action," and as they do, they inevitably feminize their afflicted speaker. The cold, wet humors—melancholy and phlegm—which hold sway after 126, engage the "desiderative [emotions] of the desire for sexual pleasure, and for the enjoyment of all kinds of food and drink." In other words, the speaker begins to use the language of the "lower" humors as the object of his desire becomes feminine, and he himself becomes feminized.

Sonnet 108 articulates the gradual feminization that results from the sexualized transmission of ink from lover to beloved, as well as the physical risks of expending ink in the pursuit of sexual fulfillment. The sonnet begins with the liquid transmission of elevated, Platonic affection, "What's in the brain that the ink may character / Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?" Here, no less than in Cocker's calligraphic cherubs, the ink "characters" the Young Man. "Charactering" becomes not only the process of transmitting the physical longing of the speaker to paper, but also of infusing the written body of the Young Man with the speaker's "true spirit," the product of the rational and spirited souls. By contrast, the "figur[ing]…of true spirit" in 108, changes to "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame" and "lust in action" in Sonnet 129. The sonnets do not represent merely a bifurcated examination of male and female humoral composition, but

75 Ibid.
the two gendered halves of the humoral body in conflict. The Dark Lady, much like the
costumed boys who played women in Shakespeare's plays, serves as a recognizable
avatar of femininity, a male speaker clothed in the humoral language of the female
body. Shakespeare's speaker alternately describes attraction and revulsion to the dark,
cold environs of his mistress's body. As Signor Gaspare says in Castiglione's *The Book
of the Courtier*, "...in the sexual act the woman is perfected by the man, whereas the
man is made imperfect." The way that Shakespeare's speaker concludes the final
sonnet, "Love's fire heats water, water cools not love," as I mention at the beginning of
this section, illustrates this cycle of imperfection (femaleness) and perfection
(maleness). The heat of male lust can warm (and thereby empower) the constitution of
the female body, but often at its own expense. The purging of melancholic humors
through writing perhaps offers a "bath and healthful remedy / For men diseased," but
relief is only temporary. The sonnets expend masculine spirit in the "waste of shame"
that constitutes poetic subjection to feminine wiles. They thereby expose a masculine
body that is out of balance and a soul in peril. The page evolves into a stage on which
poetically constructed bodies dramatize the unbalancing and rebalancing of the humors
in the flux of love and lust.

The homoeroticism of Shakespeare's sonnets has one important predecessor in
the poems of Richard Barnfield. The graphically homoerotic sonnets of Barnfield's
1595 *Cynthia with Certaine Sonnets* definitely qualify as a "carnal attack upon the

---

78 Sasha Roberts, "Shakespeare's Sonnets and English Sonnet Sequences," in Cheney, *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, 172-181. In this essay, Roberts, as I have, begins her discussion of Shakespeare's Sonnets with a reference to Barnfield, and such a discussion is apt not only for the homoerotic overtones of the works, but because of the way in which both Barnfield and Shakespeare present these poems as expressions of a body in turmoil.
brain”; moreover, like Shakespeare’s sonnets, they demonstrate the persistent association of this type of intimate, often handwritten, poetry with the fluids of the body, particularly blood.79 In the sixth sonnet of the sequence, Barnfield’s speaker narrates a dream in which “the secret touch of love’s heart-burning arrow” penetrates his heart (VI.3).80 As a result, "a spring of blood did streame" forth from him (VI.8). He awakens to find himself feeling altered, "more strong,… / …more lusty far, and far more yong" (VI.10-11). The poem literalizes the wound a lover incurs at the sight of his beloved, and implies that from this bloody heartspring, poetry arises. It also describes an alteration in the body’s composition that results from the expression of love. A similar motif appears in Barnfield’s ninth sonnet, in which the speaker describes the creation of his Ganymede:

Diana (on a time) walking the wood,
To sport herselfe, of her faire traine forlorne,
Chaunc’t for to pricke her foote against a thorne,
And from thence issu’d out a streame of blood.
No sooner shee was vanisht out of sight,
But loves faire Queen came there away by chace,
And having of this hap a glym’ring glance,
She put the blood into a christall bright,
When being now comme unto mount Rhodope,
With her faire hands she formes a shape of Snow.

79 Ferrand, Of Lovesickness, 324.
80 All references to Barnfield from Richard Barnfield, Cynthia with Certaine Sonnets, and the Legend of Cassandra, (London: Humfrey Lownes, 1598) via EEBO.
And blends it with this blood; from whence doth growe
A lovely creature, brighter then the Dey
And being christned in faire Paphos shrine.
She call'd him Ganymede: as all divine.

In this sonnet, a penetrative injury, a pricked foot, leads to a fountain of blood that is then bottled and mixed with snow to form the object of affection. This provides a potent metaphor for the process of writing sonnets. The poet, pricked by Cupid's arrow, becomes lovesick or unbalanced. He then mixes ink, and uses that ink to re-present his beloved on paper. By doing so, he attempts to rebalance his own body while at the same time transmitting his lovesickness to the beloved in hope of physical reciprocation. The conflation of ink and blood is a common early modern trope, and on stage, red ink was often used to represent blood. Conversely, the idea of using blood in place of ink appears not only in sonnets but also in dramas throughout the period, such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, and of course, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Barnfield invokes this trope in a way that emphasizes the persistent connection between writing and the body. He effectively takes the humoral processes of the lovesick body and exposes them through poetry.

Shakespeare anatomizes the intimacies of inked exchange for publication, taking the anti-Petrarchan project of Wyatt's and Surrey's courtly verse a step further. Shakespeare was not, like the other sonneteers, a coterie writer. Even though his sonnets were possibly published years after he composed them, Shakespeare habitually wrote for public consumption, and the sonnets reflect the "charactered" and

---

public working-out of interior vicissitudes. As Jyotsna G. Singh notes, Sonnet 129 provides a "taxonomy of emotional suffering and disorientation." The sonnets, through that taxonomy, chronicle the humoral shifts of a group of interconnected characters. Shakespeare likewise, and unsurprisingly (he was, after all, a dramatist), dramatizes the private physicality of the sonnet form. He creates interpenetrative bodies within these poems that further collapse the distinction between the body and the text. Shakespeare's sonnets demonstrate the contagion of humoral imbalances that affects both the lover/speaker and his beloved through the vehicle of words inked on a page.

The sonnets constitute scenes of poetic violation that put courtly intimacy on display much as his plays do. Although Shakespeare uses the language of courtly intimacy in his dedicatory epistle to Mr. WH, the sonnets themselves create and enmesh (at least) three bodies for readers' consumption—those of the speaker, the Young Man, and the Dark Lady. Shakespeare then engages these character-bodies in physical dramatics that demolish Petrarchan conceits in favor of a psycho-humoral realism. The sonnets acknowledge the messy physical realities of the humoral body—blood, semen, reeking breath, wiry hair, all the while offering their reader/spectators a fantasy of transcending those realities. In this way, the dramatics of the sonnets mirror those of the stage. Actors often used red ink to represent blood in stage productions. A play like The Spanish Tragedy, (which I address further in the next chapter) in which Bel-Imperia is supposed to be using blood for ink, complicates the intersection of ink and blood even more. As Bianca Calabresi has observed, "red ink generates meaning as blood on the early modern page as well as on the stage and, ...the staging of writing

---

in blood can itself be a kind of rubrication—a directed reading—for the spectators." As a playwright and actor, Shakespeare would certainly have been aware of, and probably have used such rubrication for emotional effect. The association between ink and the body transfers naturally from poetry to the stage.

Shakespeare's sonnets contend with the realities of the physical body from beginning to end. They chronicle the speaker's passions not euphemistically (or Euphuistically), but bluntly, externalizing internal processes for their audience. The Young Man sonnets begin in the lofty world of neo-Platonic male friendship and Petrarchan idealism—the Young Man, for a few short lines anyway, is all fairness, light, and roses. However, by Sonnet 2, the specter of natural aging has already infiltrated the imagery with wrinkles and a "tottered weed of small worth" in place of the bloom of youth (2.4). The "deep trenches" (2.2) that line the former youth's face certainly echo Surrey's "grey heares" in his adaptation of Petrarch's "a la matura etate od a l'acerba," which I discuss in the previous section. As with the poems of Wyatt and Surrey, the realities of the humoral body intrude upon the Petrarchan ideal. Those realities include reproductive realities. While the speaker of the sonnets may find himself temporarily feminized by his efforts—the messy realities of reproduction, in poetry as in life—can only belong to women.

Shakespeare's speaker, like Surrey and his fellow "maker," Wyatt, attempts to procreate poetically with the male object of his desire in the Young Man sonnets. The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets presents the woman, the "Dark Lady," in such a negative light that his initial objective, to sell the idea of marriage and procreation to his

---

Young Man, falls rather flat. Laqueur uses the metaphor of writing to explain the concept of the male seed inscribing itself in the womb; however, the conversation to which the audience of Shakespeare's sonnets is privy does not concern intercourse and procreation with a woman. 84 Instead, Shakespeare's sonnets facilitate the poetic interpenetration of two like-minded men through the humoral vehicle of the poem. Shakespeare's speaker uses ink to penetrate the brain of another man. The potential offspring of this poetic exchange is made not of flesh, but of ink and paper.

Shakespeare presents the body of the woman as already violated and therefore unappealing as a fortress to assail. The woman's body serves only as a poetic device through which Shakespeare's speaker can verbally penetrate his male beloved, his "master-mistress," in order to procreate poetically (20).

The body-focused English poetic tradition provides an alternative mode of reproduction that invokes the female body only to circumvent it. The speaker of Shakespeare's procreation sonnets pleads with the male object of his desire to marry and bear children so that he may guarantee his immortality. Yet the "Dark Lady" sonnets that follow (and in fact, many of the earlier poems in the sequence that refer to female sexuality by contrast) paint a less-than-appealing portrait of the female body, as a cold, wet, inhospitable place in which this "idea" of immortality must hatch itself. Shakespeare does his predecessors one better, not only violating the body of his beloved with words, but also procreating outside the vile "vial" of the female body. Like Barnfield's Venus, Shakespeare builds his Ganymede within the pristine crystal of the inkwell.

84 Laqueur, Making Sex, 59.
The entire sonnet sequence chronicles a humoral progression from an ideal, exclusively male reproduction in the Young Man poems, to a messy, almost repellent sexuality in the Dark Lady poems. Joel Fineman has argued that the sonnets move hierarchically from heart to eye and from male to female, to reach a neo-Platonic reconciliation of binaries. They do move hierarchically, in sexual terms, according to Laqueur’s one-sex model—from male perfection to female imperfection. I agree that the poems reconcile two parts of the sexual psyche, the ideal and the physical. However, the reconciliation is anything but neo-Platonic. This reconciliation admits the inevitability of physical sexuality, that lower rung in the Great Chain of Being, even in the most idealized Petrarchan writing.

The Young Man sonnets, as a preserved, physical text of the poet’s emotions, could be read as a Platonic form of reproduction. This pen-and-ink offspring arises from what Montaigne calls a “perfect friendship…indivisible” in which “each one gives himself so wholly to his friend that he has nothing left,” and the friendship “possesses the soul.” The perfect friendship with the Young Man leads to textual reproduction. In contrast, however, consummation with the Dark Lady, a “wavering and variable” relationship of a “fickle flame,…subject to fits and lulls” leads, inescapably, to inferior biological offspring. What the sonnets reconcile is the two roles of ink—to idealize and to sully. This child of print, this copy of Shakespeare’s love, transcends a binary construction of gender, thereby upholding Laqueur’s one-sex model and conventional

87 Ibid.,59.
Renaissance gender hierarchy at the same time. Yet the fact of his lust for the Dark Lady and all her imperfections remains. The competing objects of Shakespeare's sonnets express the humoral flux of the speaker as he moves from masculine lust and choler to feminine melancholy and back again.

The final couplet of Sonnet 17 seems to argue the parity of poetic and biological offspring, "But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice in it and in my rhyme" (17. 13-14). However, the rhetoric of the couplet places the poem above the child by giving the speaker's "rhyme" the final word. The child exists only hypothetically, while the poem has already transmitted the seed of conception into the Young Man's brain. Sonnet 18 continues the rhetoric of inked immortality in its final couplet, "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (18. 13-14). Shakespeare's speaker figures the words of his own poem as a life-giving essence, a fluid that grants immortality. In Sonnet 54, the "verse distils" the Young Man's "truth" (54.14), and in Sonnet 55, the speaker identifies the poem as a "living record" of the Young Man's memory. The poem's language makes the word flesh, and gives it the power to reproduce the beloved ad infinitum "in lovers' eyes" (55.8,14). Ironically, the word and seed unite in these poems, underscoring the sexual nature of poetic intercourse, even as the speaker tries to elevate the word in relation to the body.

The physically penetrative and reproductive qualities of poetry can also explain the darkness of the Dark Lady. Once the sonnets turn from the male beloved to the raven-haired mistress, the tenor of their sexual symbolism darkens. The blackness of ink on paper immortalizes sexual transgressions, "beauty slandered with a bastard
shame" (127.4). The sonnets to the lady commemorate an adulterous, deceitful relationship, and defy the procreative metaphors of those addressed to the Young Man. The art of poetry devolves from a godlike creative process into the artifice of covering one's sins, "Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face" (127.6). Bodily fluids course through these sonnets as they do through the preceding ones, but these are not the pure, distilled spirits that make vials sweet. These are bloody, obscure fluids, designed to transmit a different sort of heat. "The expense of spirit" for the Dark Lady is "a waste of shame / …lust in action… / perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame" (129.1-3). The Dark Lady sonnets symbolize sexual violation and the subsequent loss of value for their object. Unlike the Young Man, who may, according to social convention, engage in a variety of sexual exchanges with impunity, the Dark Lady, once violated, loses her value as a poetic mistress.

The transmission of ink between men elevates sexuality. Male poets can create divinity from ink, like Cocker's airily drawn cherubs, or Barnfield's Ganymede. On the other hand, once the male spirit enters the female body, it quickly cools and loses its creative spark. Returning to Hamlet, as Ophelia reads a book to "color [her] loneliness," the traitorous Claudius remarks, "The harlot's cheek, beautified with plastering art, / Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it / Than is my deed to my most painted word" (3.1.45-46, 52-54). The likening of the word to an impure woman reinforces the symbiotic relationship of text and sex. Nothing remains for the woman polluted by the text but the nunnery. Like Lady Mary Wroth, Ophelia and the Dark Lady come out of the poetic transaction not immortalized, but ruined. For women, the consumption of verses
leads to a state of humoral flux that leaves them confined to the "drossy slime" of their earthbound bodies, and at their lovesick suitors' mercy.

Shakespeare's sonnets present two humoral sides of the same coin. As the poet/speaker descends into lust, his hot and dry composition becomes more female, and as such, more tainted or "vile." Despite a visit to the nymph's well in an attempt to heal, the speaker finds that "water cools not love," but perhaps the expression of ink could. Perhaps the written dramatics of the sonnets enabled both the contagion of lovesick thoughts and an avenue for their purgation. They act, Platonically, as both medicine and poison. As Valerie Traub has argued, "erotic practice is material practice," and "Shakespeare's language [in the dramas] metaphorizes and materializes desire" in the dismembered parts of the body.88 I would add that the sonnets serve the same purpose in a focused, concentrated, but no less "dramatic" manner. The sonnets dramatize the complex interplay between body and text, and between ink and humors. I find it particularly apt, then, that Derrida ends Plato's Pharmacy (the source of my headnote) with Plato "closing the pharmacy...to get out of the sun." Plato sees "the whole pharmacy reflected" as he looks "within the thick, cloudy liquid." He proceeds with his analysis of the complex and contradictory substance "holding the pharmakon in one hand, the calamus [or pen] in the other," very much approximating the sonneteer and his inkwell, transcribing an inner darkness that is "nothing like the sun."

CHAPTER 3

CRYING OVER SPILT INK: WRITING AND THE RUINED WOMAN

But now the wounded queen with hevy care,
Throughout the veines she norisheth the playe,
Surprised with blind flame; and to hir mind
Gan eke resort the prowesse of the man
And honour of his race: while in her brest
Imprinted stack his wordes, and pictures forme.

—Henry Howard, Earl Surrey, *The Aeneid of Henry Howard Earl of Surrey*

The interrogation of Petrarchism that many early modern English sonneteers undertake, particularly emphasizing the textual/sexual nature of the Petrarchan mistress, infiltrates early modern writing beyond the sonnet sequence. Surrey, Wyatt, Spenser, and Shakespeare, as the previous chapter demonstrates all invoke specific cultural notions about the permeability of the body and the physical costs of writing and reading in their poetry. The persistent references these sonneteers make to the physiological origins of love poetry highlight the influence that inked expression has over the economy of fluids in the bodies of poets and their mistresses. The correlation between written texts and the body intensifies for female authors and characters because early modern women’s writing, reading, and speech were as sexualized and circumscribed as the female body. The character of the violated mistress, the ruined woman, exemplifies the transmission of humoral imbalances through writing. The problematic relationship between women and writing that existed in the early modern period reflects complicated cultural notions of the female body itself. Early modern

---


perceptions of female sexuality as something to be vigilantly contained complicated the acts of reading and writing for women. Because of the early modern use of ink as a sort of "fifth humor," textual exchanges become physiological. So for a woman to engage in these sorts of exchanges puts her at risk of contamination and ruin.

Ink expressed onto paper carried the humoral conditions of the writer to its intended audience. Since women, as contemporary medical theorists like Jacques Ferrand argued, were "more passionate in love and more frantic and rash in [their] folly than man," and "letters and love notes crammed with enticing words that lovers use" were "dangerous," the consumption and expression of such texts involved taking a physical risk. That risk bore uncertain rewards, at best, while at worst, it led to ruin or death.3 Surrey's version of Dido, for example, certainly demonstrates the way emotional and physical violations figured themselves textually in the early modern imagination. Fittingly, Ferrand uses Dido as an example of the perils of lovesickness, and she (in the context of Henry Howard, Earl Surrey's translation, quoted above) embodies the particular expressive dilemma faced by early modern women.

As the verse in the headnote demonstrates, Surrey's Dido is "wounded" by words that "throughout the veines she norisheth." A modern translation presents the same lines about Dido in a much more abstract fashion. "But the Queen, long sick with love,/ Nurses her heart's deep wound / With her pounding blood, and dark flames / Lick at her soul (IV. 1-4)."4 The twenty-first century iteration effaces the venis (veins) of the Latin in

---

3 Ferrand, A Treatise on Lovesickness, 311, 243.
favor of "pounding blood."\textsuperscript{5} The more literal \textit{alit} (feeds) of the Latin, which Surrey writes as "norisheth," becomes "nurses," something more stereotypically feminine, and yet, in the context of the modern expression "nursing a wound," far less literal. The modern English translation eschews vivid imagery of veins and nourishment, of stories ingested, instead describing a pounding pulse, metaphoric flames and the abstract "soul." In short, Surrey preserves and emphasizes the biological sense of the Latin in a way that the modern English translation does not. The early modern translation embraces a contemporary attitude about the ingestion of texts that reflects the mutually affective relationships among reading, writing, and the body.

Even more revealing, though, is not what Surrey preserves from the Latin, but what he adds to it. Virgil's \textit{haerant infixi pectore vultus / verbaque…} like Surrey's version, evokes the idea of a physical wound to the heart, a penetration of the chest. However, the figuring of Dido's breast as an "imprinted stack," a physical repository for Aeneas's "wordes and pictures," is Surrey's own addition. Surrey's translation of Virgil infuses Dido with the same humoral textuality that characterizes the English Petrarchan mistress. Considering Surrey's role in the creation of this particularly sexualized version of the Petrarchan mistress in his own sonnets (addressed in the previous chapter), this is hardly surprising. The verbal wound that Aeneas inflicts upon Dido prefigures both his sexual violation of her body and the fatal wound that Dido will inflict upon herself with Aeneas's sword after he leaves Carthage. Even an accomplished ruler and stateswoman like Dido finds herself driven to express her inner wound using her body

\textsuperscript{5} I rely here and throughout on the Latin verse and editorial notes from Virgil, \textit{Virgil Aeneid IV}, Keith MacLennan, ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2007).
as a textual vehicle. She creates a suicidal drama to publish the message of her heartbreak.

The necessity of extreme measures to effect the purgation of lovesick humors from Dido's body engages contemporary ideas about the need to keep the volatile female body hermetic. Women's bodies were perceived as an imperfect, more permeable version of men's bodies. It follows that their writing would be perceived in the same way—similar to that of men but hierarchically inferior. As Mary Ellen Lamb has observed, "Women's reading, unlike men's, shared with women's writing an exaggeratedly sexual determination, either through excess or lack of sexuality." The major unavoidable difference between men and women, the womb, created biological, humoral, and rhetorical uncertainty about the (presumably male) creative impulse and its functions within the female body. This chapter demonstrates the way certain ruined women of Renaissance literature destroy their own bodies in order to express the damages that male texts have inflicted upon them. Early modern writers, exhibiting the contemporary conflation of ink and the body, tend to present this destruction in terms of paper and ink, and in terms of broken vessels that expose the murky liquid within.

For women, writing followed the same physiological rules as for men, but with one important difference: women could only partially "exscribe," to take a word from Jonson's ode to Mary Wroth, their imbalances. Their bodies permanently internalized the humoral damage inflicted upon them, and the scars of this damage permeate women's texts in various ways. Female characters and writers tend to express their

---

6 Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 109
melancholy, lovesickness, or anger violently and physically, with no hope of healing in
the process of that expression. The male sonneteers I discuss in the previous chapter
all planned to heal themselves using writing. Whether or not they were ultimately
successful, the option of healing themselves through the expression and dissemination
of their words was always available to them. The possibility of purging their ill humors
and recovering their vital heat pervades their poetry, no matter how dark it becomes.
For female writers, by contrast, the revelation, rather than the full expression, of their
internal imbalances seems to be all they can hope for in the process of writing. They
expose themselves like cadavers in the anatomic theatre, dissected for the benefit of an
audience. The texts of their bodies offer graphic tableaus of what can go wrong when
women read or listen promiscuously. Like Shakespeare's feminized speaker in his
sonnets, female writers find themselves further sickened by purging. The damage within
them is irreversible, so while they can begin to heal by putting pen to paper, they may
only fully expunge their lovesick imbalances by destroying the vessel in which those
imbalances reside.

Dido, for example, despite her power and standing as a queen, cannot fully
express the suffering that Aeneas's words visit upon her without destroying herself.
Dido's poetic response is, to borrow once more from W.A. Sessions' discussion of
Surrey, the "textual scream" of suicide. Dido, by accepting Aeneas's words, has
irrevocably altered her physical self. She can only erase the imprint of the male text by
destroying the medium of that imprint, her body. In this way, textual suffering evolves
into physical suffering. An oral text ingested becomes indelibly etched within the body,

---

9 Sessions, Henry Howard the Poet Earl of Surrey: A Life, 385.
the "brain-uterus" of its female audience. The body inscribed evolves into what Gail Kern Paster has called "the body embarrassed." Paster's discussion of the varied and complicated cultural meanings of blood and bleeding, which "cannot be isolated from the inevitably hierarchical structures of social difference," complements my own work here on the gendered and complicated functions of ink. The qualities of ink as a humoral fluid vary similarly to those of blood, according to the state of the body that writes. The half-black and half-red blood that pours from Shakespeare's Lucrece after her suicide illustrates the connection between the two fluids particularly well. However, even more oblique references to the body as a writing vessel preserve the intimate connection between written expression and the physical process of describing the story of a woman's ruin. For example Titus Andronicus's Lavinia, mutilated (and muted), manages to describe her rape at the hands of Tamora's sons, by using the bloody stumps where her hands used to be to scratch words in the dirt. The parallels of Dido's situation with that of dramatic characters, such as Shakespeare's Lucrece or Lavinia, as well as that of a poetic persona like Wroth's Pamphilia, points to a broad pattern of textual influence over the literary female body: a woman internalizes a male text or texts, becomes tainted, then spreads the contagion using her own body as a medium.

In keeping with that pattern, one of the most famous suicides of Renaissance drama, Ophelia, shares Dido's desire to express the story of her own ruin. Ophelia also shares Dido's inability to do so without using her own corpse as "book and volume"
I address the effect of various male texts on Ophelia in the next chapter, so here I instead focus on the complicated and incomplete expression of the damage those texts inflict upon her. After accepting Hamlet's letters and odes of affection, Ophelia finds herself infected by, and unable to express, his melancholy madness. Nonsense songs provide all the purgative power Ophelia can muster to defend her body from the onslaught of disturbing masculine texts that plague her throughout the play. In 4.5, she does offer running commentary on the symbolism of the plants, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; / …And there is pansies; that's for thoughts," etc. (4.5.179-180), but she never articulates her own suffering directly, either in written or spoken words. Hamlet's black-and-white, dramatic presentation of his sorrow provides a contrast to her colorful, mute madness. For men (and male characters), melancholy was a fashionable condition; the writing of poetry concerning it was a respectable, aristocratic pastime. For women, the process was construed differently, complicated by the simultaneous and incompatible ideas of hermetic virtue and lustful contamination—a conflict summed up nicely in the ironic use of "nunnery" as a euphemism for "brothel." Ophelia, like Lucrece, becomes contaminated by a textual drama among men. Like Lavinia, her damaged body provides her only means of asserting herself in the text, but to do so, she must ultimately destroy herself. Full and complete expression for Ophelia, as for Lucrece, Lavinia, and Surrey's Dido, is fatal.

Ophelia's inability to fully express or write out her grief leads to her self-destruction. The role of ink in the creation of her grief and melancholy emerges through

---


the play's description of her corpse. Ophelia's body, as Gertrude describes it, surrounded by "fantastic garlands... / Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples" (4.7.169-170), transmits the text of woe that infected her at the end of her life. Much like the flowers in Shakespeare's sonnets, as Elizabeth D. Harvey has observed, these fantastic garlands certainly "infiltrate" the scene, "expressing through color, scent, and emotional valence the intimacy of the body's inner psychic and imaginative life." Ink, another product distilled from water and plant materials, served much the same purpose—channeling the passions to create a text to be read. Rather than black ink, Ophelia's pain becomes refracted through her body as light through a prism, and separates into multicolored (and multivalent) component parts. Gertrude, carefully describing the appearance of the corpse, creates from it a corpus that visually colors Ophelia's inner pain. Floating among the flowers, Ophelia's dead body exposes the textual sins of the men who ruined her. Only in death can she fully exscribe what Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes have inscribed.

Ophelia's case exemplifies women's inability to express humoral imbalances (to which women were supposed to be particularly vulnerable) fully. That inability leads to irreversible sexual ruination, social ruination, and often death, for many of the female figures in Renaissance poetry and drama. Like Dido and Ophelia, two other figures demonstrate the function of ink as a fluid of humoral contagion and expression: Mary Wroth's Pamphilia and Shakespeare's Lucrece. Both of these characters experience textual and sexual violations in equal measure, and both try and fail to fully express the resulting imbalances through writing alone. Pamphilia, the poetic persona of a woman

---

sonneteer, offers volumes of writing in response to her heartbreak, yet she never finds
the healing she seeks. She finds instead a way of inspiring poetry in others, of
transmitting imbalance and lovesickness to them. In the final sonnet of the sequence,
she asks her muse to "Write...noe more, butt lett thes phant'sies move / Some other
harts," so that she may "...theyr brains inspire / With storys of great love, and from that
fire / Gett heat to write the fortunes they have wunn" (P103, 3-4, 10-12). Pamphilia
creates a contagion that carries her story forward through other people. Lucrece, too,
causes herself to bleed to death in the presence of the men who will, from her blood,
render the story of the new Roman Republic. Like Surrey's Dido, she illustrates the way
texts taint the female body irremediably, leaving self-inflicted violence as the only mode
of full expression. These characters demonstrate that the limitations imposed on
women's bodies equal the limitations of their written expression. The intimate
relationship between ink and the body leads each of them, finally, to present their
bodies as texts to be read and ingested by others.

Part I: Lady Mary Wroth and the Dark Lady: Writing Ruination

The Dark Lady poems illustrate the early modern problem of women's reading
and writing, a problem that arose from "a long tradition representing women's reading
as contaminated by a particularly virulent form of sensuality."¹⁵ To take in love poetry
was construed as a sexual act, as Lamb notes, an association that I think arises in part
from the cultural perception of ink as a biological fluid. Shakespeare's sonnets explore,
via persistent metaphors of writing material, the inky and fluid character of "ruined"

¹⁵ Mary Ellen Lamb, "Women Readers in Wroth's Urania," in Naomi J. Miller and Gary Waller, eds.,
Reading Mary Wroth, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 212-213.
womanhood by continually invoking the physical violation that the reception of a text constitutes. The sonnets often present the Dark Lady's particular "darkness" in terms of the blackness of ink and the process of writing. Shakespeare's speaker expresses the pain of betrayal by his sonnets' two addressees, describing himself as having drunk "potions…of siren tears / Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within" (119.1-2). The speaker describes his woe as a distilled liquid consumed and then put forth into poetry. The "limbeck," or alembic, and the "potions" are indeed terms of "alchemy and medicine," as Stephen Booth has noted, but they are also terms associated with handwriting. Indeed, the language of Shakespeare's speaker in Sonnet 119 echoes that of Edward Cocker's handwriting manual, which contains writing advice and samples "all distill'd from the Limbeck of the Authors own Brain."17

Upon reception of such distillations, such "expense of spirit," the mistress must become sullied (129.1). This contamination by reading, in addition to the betrayal embedded in the sonnets' overarching narrative, explains why the tone of the Dark Lady poems "move[s] from praise to blame with [such] remarkable rapidity."18 The first two sonnets praise the lady's physical beauty and accomplished musicianship in fairly traditional terms, even as they emphasize her "black" beauty and "raven black" eyes (127.3, 9). The sudden bitterness of Sonnet 129 may derive from "post-coital tristesse"; however, it also bemoans post-poetic or post-textual melancholy.19 The (rather brief) expense of ink extolling the mistress's virtues initiates a series of violations that must

16 Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets, 398-399.
17 Cocker, The Pen's Triumph, 23.
19 Ibid.
make her ultimately unworthy of such an expense, while taking a physical toll on her admirer as well.

As I argue in the previous section, Shakespeare's speaker becomes dark, melancholy, and feminized in the course of expressing his lust for the Dark Lady. The sonnets directed at her attempt to rebalance his humors by describing his beloved's ruination. He tries to alleviate his physical suffering as he blackens her reputation with the ink of his pen. Sonnet 129 details the moment of textual/sexual violation of the speaker's mistress. Sonnet 130 then details the physical results of that violation—a transformation of the alabaster Petrarchan mistress into a woman whose every physical imperfection is exposed and subjected to judgment. Sonnet 130's comical reversal of every Petrarchan trope is not just a "winsome trifle" with "no aim but to be funny," although it is indeed funny.20 Sonnet 130 demonstrates the "blackening" of the poetic mistress as a direct result of her receipt of humoral, and yes, humorous, verses.

The cycle of writing and reading is dangerous for women because it makes visible the hidden processes of their bodies, makes them "legible not only to [their] lover[s], but to all who might choose to gaze upon [them]."21 Poets' use of the blazon to anatomize and control a woman's body is by no means a new critical insight; however, the specific and particular role of ink in that public anatomy remains unexplored. Shakespeare's speaker violates his mistress specifically by putting her inner "blackness" out into the world through the vehicle of ink. That "blackness serves simultaneously as a perfectly corresponding outward expression of an inner condition

21 Harvey, "Flesh Colors and Shakespeare's Sonnets," 324.
and as a sign of the inscrutable nature of that innerness," as well as a consistent reminder of the medium through which "that innerness" becomes visible to others.  

Shakespeare's sonnets undertake a project of containing female sexuality within the confines of the inkwell—a vial of dark, volatile fluid that the speaker fails to "make sweet" through the process of poetic distillation (6.3). The sonnets examine the consumption and production of poetry as "performative utterances" that expose the humoral drama of written exchange at the same time as they narrate a human sexual drama.  

Lamb, Harvey, Bell, and others have explored the way writing worked to reinforce early modern sexual mores, but have not connected that reinforcement to the specific humoral qualities of ink. I intend to demonstrate in this section, how much of the sexual, physical force of early modern poetry depends upon the construal of ink as a bodily fluid. That close relationship between ink, blood, and humors leads to a perception of writing as a physical compulsion, and of reading as an ingestion that can alter the bodies of the women who partake in it.  

Lady Mary Wroth's Amphilanthus, in her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, attempts the same unsuccessful project of contamination and containment that Shakespeare's speaker attempts. However, Wroth's female speaker, Pamphilia, insists on writing about her heartbreak in the first person, using the same, controlled, masculine form—the sonnet—that her suitor has used against her. Wroth herself certainly understood the relationship between writing and sexuality, as a woman who took immense social risks in both these arenas. Wroth took such risks in her ongoing affair with her cousin, William Herbert, Earl Pembroke, and with the publication

---

22 Ibid.  

23 Bell, "Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady," 296.
of *The Countess of Montgomeries Urania*, which fictionalized the romantic details of her life and others at court. Wroth herself was perceived as a "ruined" woman, and she examines that murky status in literary terms throughout *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus*, insistently reminding her beloved of the physically destructive power of ink even as she uses it to publish her own ruin.

Pamphilia identifies writing as a possible remedy for her lovesickness while noting the inadequacy of writing as a complete cure. Pamphilia laments that, despite her attempts to purge her lovesickness, "No time, noe roome, no thought, or writing can / Give rest, or quiett to my loving hart" once she has taken in the poems and overtures of her Amphilanthus (P101.1-2). As a woman, she is subject to the various influences of others' writings, but has limited power to redress those influences. The way Pamphilia conjures images of food, drink, and humors to express her imbalance, emphasizes the physical origins of her poetry. She refers to the words of her lover as alternately "famish[ing]" and giving "food" to her affections (P15.1). She expresses, through her writing, "rage" that "feede[s] / Upon foule error which thes humours breed" (P20.9,10). Words, expressions of "spirit" (P15.3) that they are, affect bodies profoundly, especially female bodies. Throughout Wroth's sonnet sequence, she narrates the consequences of love realized, not merely love idealized. Pamphilia's desire is double-edged—she is a lover who seeks satisfaction of her desires, but she is also a woman, for whom such consummation carries inevitable risks—disgrace, disease, pregnancy—any one of which would render her unmarriageable, undesirable, or at the very least unrequited.

---

Because of the significant role reading and writing played in the seduction and ruination of literary women, any and all of these consequences emerge in textual terms, as in the "imprinted stack" of Dido's breast that appears in the headnote of this section.

Pamphilia offers the unique perspective of a woman ruined by poetry as much as by sexual indiscretion. When she begs, "Dear famish nott what you yourself gave food" (P15.1), and "Kill nott that soule to which you spirrit gave" (P15.3), she engages the idea of love poetry as something ingestible, and furthermore creates a parallel with the word "spirrit," which was not merely figurative but also a word for semen. Wroth presents her poem as a substitute for and product of both food and sex, comparing herself to a "Camaelion," a creature believed to live on air, in the final line. Wroth engages these ideas even as she acknowledges her inability to fully "discharg[e]" "[her] paine, still smother'd in [her] grieved brest" (P68.3,1). Something inhibits the complete release she desires, even as she expends ink in its pursuit.

Pamphilia uses poetry to try to heal her lovesickness, but since such a healing must always be incomplete for the irreversibly ruined woman, she intends to spread the contagion to others. In the second poem of her "Crowne of Sonnetts dedicated to Love," Wroth likens love to a "lasting lampe fed with the oyle of right"; and the "…wombe for joyes increase" (P78.11-12). Interestingly, lampblack—the soot from burning oil, was one of the key ingredients in carbon ink, popularly known as India ink. The other common writer's ink, iron-gall ink, was made from wasp galls, a reproductive product created when a female gall wasp lays eggs on particular species of oak trees.²⁶

Considering these common modes of its production, ink carried with it an abundance of metaphoric possibilities as both a carrier of heat and of natural reproductive fluid.

In Wroth's poem, the burning lamp image, combined with the imagery of a womb, presents the very letters on the page as both the waste product of burning heat and a reproductive, biological product. Within this one extended metaphor, Pamphilia embeds the components of writing, the distillation of burning affection into poetry, and an image of female fertility. Pamphilia's passions, ignited by the inked words of her beloved, and distilled through the inkwell and the body, here flow forth directly onto the page for her beloved to consume. She hopes to transmit the pain of her physical ruin back to him, or at the very least, "crost [her]self, wish some like [her] to make" (P45). The medium of that transmission is not a figurative blackness, but the very tangible blackness of the fluid in the inkwell.

Pamphilia's ruin comes from the irreversible contamination of the female body, the same contamination that Shakespeare illustrates in Sonnet 130. In this sonnet, Shakespeare's speaker distills the "spectrum of colors" down to black, not only because it represents the inscrutable interior of the female body, as Harvey has argued, but because of the power of ink (most often black) to transmit the fluid passions of the body. The "Coral...far more red than her lips' red," drains the lips of their seductive power and hale, blood-flushed redness (130.2). No gold, no glistening white, and no "roses damasked" bring the state of the mistress's humoral psyche to the surface for easy reading. Rather than the natural heat of rosy cheeks, the speaker describes a face drained of color. No flush of maiden heat can mask the ruin of this "black" figure.

---

27 Ibid., 324-325.
Shakespeare reverses the common pattern of the blazon. He blends all the metaphoric ingredients into blackness, a blackness that finds its way from his melancholy heart onto the page through the vessel of inkwell and quill.

Even though a male poet/speaker like Shakespeare can enact a more thorough transmission of his humoral condition than a female poet/speaker like Pamphilia, the structure of the poetry itself still offers some measure of relief for her afflicted heart. To this end, Lady Mary Wroth exploits the confinements of the sonnet form to echo the confinements of the female form. Often, her sonnet's perspective reflects the unique expressive problems of Wroth's female speaker. As I mentioned in the previous section, Wroth was a "ruined" woman who bore two illegitimate children to her first cousin.28 While I would not argue for a strict biographical reading of these poems, Wroth's life experiences certainly fortified her poetic experience. Among those life experiences, we must count the influence of her uncle, Sir Philip Sidney.

Wroth built *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus*, unambiguously, on the poetic foundations of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, discussed in the second chapter. Comparing their approaches is instructive of the different ways men and women could use ink as a humoral purgative or as a means of transmitting imbalances. In *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Wroth alludes often to Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, and in each case, the sonnet's perspective reflects the unique problems of Wroth's female speaker. The main problem for the female speaker is the irreversibility of her ruin. The speakers of these parallel sonnets each grapple with despair of ever gaining (or in Pamphilia's case, regaining) their objects of desire. But the different genders of the speakers change the

urgency of their respective arguments. Astrophil begins by asking Hope if it is "...true, or
dost [it] flatter him?" (67.1)²⁹ Wroth's Pamphilia also begins by questioning Hope, "Fy,
tedious Hope, why doe you still rebell?/ Is itt nott yet enough you flatterd mee?" (27.1-2).
Astrophil and Pamphilia each attempt to reject Hope's flattery. However, the
beloved's rejection has far more serious consequences for Pamphilia. This social fact
lends a darker tone to her poem as her interrogation of Hope continues. Pamphilia's
hope does not merely flatter but "rebel[s]," demonstrating the way the female speaker
must hold captive any hope she feels. Like Lucrece, Pamphilia can only appeal to men
to restore her honor, and even that possibility carries the taint of destruction.

Both Sidney's and Wroth's speakers invoke the image of ruins, but being ruined
means vastly different things for a man and a woman. The language and imagery that
follows the ruins in each poem illustrate the differences. Astrophil has hope that Stella,
spying "The ruins of her conquest," will "take time, before all wracked be" (67.3-4).
Astrophil may save himself yet. Ruination for him is simply a lack of reciprocity, which in
any case will lead to some excellent poetry. Pamphilia, on the other hand, is (always)
already "ruind," polluted by an inconstant lover who now rejects her, and presumed
unchaste by her courtly audience. The same "embers" that give rise to the poem
symbolize the residual heat of her lover. Pamphilia's ruin, unlike Astrophil's, comes from
the irreversible contamination of the female body, and her hope is therefore of a more
desperate variety. Wroth's poetry, like the blackened publication of Lucrece's blood, is
awash in physical consequences.

²⁹ All Sidney quotations from Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed., Sir Philip Sidney, (Oxford University Press:
Wroth's apostrophe to Hope (P31), brings the problem of expression back to the interior, and more specifically, to the womb. Pamphilia invokes imagery of miscarriage as she addresses Hope, and she chastises Hope for the "blasted blossoms" and "wither'd and dead" delights that issue from her tryst with Amphilanthus. Pamphilia moves from miscarriage to a "bliss [that] proves Hell," and then to her own ruination, the embers of which remain to remind her of the pain of rejection (P31.8-11). The evidence of Pamphilia's misjudgment resides within her body. Her poetic address to Hope is the only hope she has of purging herself of it.

Along with the imagery of "fruite" and "blasted...blossoms" which evoke ideas of ruined fertility, even miscarriage, Wroth also uses rhyme scheme in a way that reiterates Pamphilia's truncated expression. The poem adheres to neither the strict Italian nor English sonnet forms, creating something completely different. Most notably, the argument-ending couplet, as is often the case in Wroth's work, finds itself embedded between two other lines, so that instead of the common cdee ending, Wroth ends bddb, as follows:

In embers of that fire which ruind mee,
Thus Hope, your faulshood calls you to bee tride
You're loth I see the triall to abide;
Prove true att last, and gaine your liberty. (P31.11-14)

The poem, recognizable as a sonnet, heir to a particular tradition, nonetheless delivers its argument uniquely, in a pregnant quatrain. From Pamphilia's ruin, then, arise words, inked on a page, which express (however imperfectly) the product of her lovesickness.
Even as she exploits a masculine verse form, recurrent imagery of wombs, blood, and tears saturates Wroth's poems, emphasizing the permanence of ruin for women. Whatever hope of healing the art of writing may have provided for Pamphilia the form of expression seems to fall short time and again. In P40, Pamphilia describes "Faulce hope which feeds butt to destroy, and spill / What itt first breeds; unaturall to the birth / Of thine owne wombe…" (P40.1-3). Here we have no pregnant quatrain, but instead graphic imagery of miscarriage and personal destruction—an uncanny type of birth. In this sonnet, "Hope kills the hart, and tyrants shed the blood," a violence that leads to a final couplet, in masculine rhyme, with nothing embedded: "For hope deluding brings us to the pride / Of our desires the farder downe to slide" (P40.12-14). The "breeding" that takes place in this poem is of a sinister variety that leads only to miscarriage. Hope in this sonnet becomes, to return to Shakespeare, "perjured, murd’rous, bloody," and "full of blame" indeed (129.3). Pamphilia takes this ruin and transforms it into poetry. However, as in the cycles of the female body, that creation coexists with bloody destruction.

The language of conflict, "breeding," and bleeding emphasizes the way feminine melancholy conflicts with the masculine mode of expression, the sonnet, which Pamphilia uses to try to purge it. The Dark Lady and Pamphilia exemplify the strange, imperfect relationship between written/printed texts and the female body. Wroth's poetry, like the published ruin of the Dark Lady or Ophelia, is awash in physical consequences. While, unlike Pamphilia, she does no writing of her own, the Dark Lady's body becomes a vehicle of transcription for the passionate flux of Shakespeare's speaker. I argue in the previous chapter that Shakespeare's sonnets do not represent
merely a bifurcated examination of male and female humoral composition, but the two
gendered halves of the humoral body in conflict. Wroth's sonnets often illustrate a
similar type of gendered humoral tension. The poems paint the dark, ruined woman in
relief against the clear, rigid form of the sonnet, "As gold by fire, and black desernd by
white" (P79). Pamphilia "wish[es] for day" only to "finde new tortures to destroy / [Her]
woe-kil'd hart," then "welcome[s] Night," only to find that at night, she "can beehold rage
cowardly to feede / Upon foule error which thes humours breed" (P13.2-4, P20.9-10).
She creates poetry in effort to purge her ill humors. However, she finds in the
restrictions of the poetic form, and perhaps in the society at large, only further "tortures."
The dark humors feed upon themselves and reproduce within the vessel of her body
each night. These sonnets describe a cyclical purging, or bleeding, a decidedly feminine
phenomenon, yet they present themselves as equals to the poems of their male
predecessors. Pamphilia's graphic suffering, juxtaposed with a "teleogically male" poetic
form creates the same sort of "verbal chafing" that Stephen Greenblatt has described in
Shakespeare's plays.30 She exudes, through the multivalent medium of ink, both male
erotic heat and feminine melancholy.

Wroth's work, much like her predecessors in the art of sonneteering, especially
Sidney, imbues the Petrarchan mistress with living humoral qualities through the vehicle
of ink. The mistresses in the English tradition are not marble monuments like Laura, but
living, breathing, sweating human beings. In other words, "when [they walk tread] on the
ground" (108.12). To return (cyclically) to the character with whom I begin the chapter,
Pamphilia's misery echoes Dido's story—falling on her beloved's sword, immolated in a

fire of his belongings. Pamphilia calls love "hapy smarting...with smale paine, / Such as although, itt pierce your tender hart / And burne, yett burning you will love the smart" (P80.12-14). Clearly, the flowery words Pamphilia has received are nourishing the misery in her veins as Aeneas' words have for Dido. However, her recourse to writing offers some relief, however inadequate. Pamphilia "seeke[s] for some smale ease by lines..." yet finds that "...griefe is nott cur'd by art" (8.3-4). Wroth's speaker, more articulate and emotionally expressive than either Ophelia or Dido, still finds mere writing insufficient to the task of healing her wounded heart. Pamphilia can write out her suffering, but in doing so she places her lovesick body in the anatomical theatre for all to view. To put quill to paper and then disseminate the result, leaves a woman writer vulnerable in ways a male sonneteer would not be.

Shakespeare, unlike Wyatt, Surrey, or even Sidney, seems more aware of the disparity between male and female personae in writing, as well as the essential role ink plays in upholding that disparity. He and Lady Mary Wroth both engage the humoral intersection of ink and the body in gender-specific ways. Wroth's Pamphilia writes from the experience of her own ruin, and Shakespeare's speaker writes about the ruined female body in the context of his own lovesickness. Shakespeare's speaker alternately describes attraction and revulsion to the dark, cold environs of his mistress's body, and one can imagine that Pamphilia feels similarly conflicted about her own body, particularly its vulnerability to ruin by men and their "faire showes" (P8.11). So, "does the sequence culminate in Pamphilia's freedom from love and the sonnet tradition, or is her achievement of that state incomplete?"31 The expenditure of ink in this particular

---

form does enable some escape from ruin—neither Pamphilia nor the Dark Lady find themselves drowned or burned in the name of love's expression. However, that expression is still incomplete. The sonnet form, like the body, remains intact even as it provides a vessel for the volatile humors of lovesickness. Often lustful, imbalanced men like Amphilanthus, "Mr. WH," Tarquin, or even Hamlet, end up ruining women, and spreading their humoral imbalances, through pen and ink, rather than healing themselves. The women who receive that poetry must then express that disease in any way they can, and when ink and paper fail them, their blood, their very anatomy, finishes the process of expression. Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* demonstrates this type of physical sacrifice in the context of a widely published poem—one that takes this humoral communication beyond its typical coterie audience. *Lucrece* dramatically stages the power of words to transform bodies and demonstrates the necessity (and tendency) of the humorally imbalanced body to give rise to texts.

Part II: Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* and the Risky Publication of Female Virtue

In her the painter had anatomized

Time's ruin, beauty's rack, and grim care's reign.

Her cheeks with chaps and wrinkles were disguised;

Of what she was no semblance did remain.

Her blue blood, changed to black in every vein,

    Wanting the spring that those shrunk pipes had fed,

    Showed life imprisoned in a body dead.
I begin this section on *The Rape of Lucrece* with a brief discussion of its immediate predecessor, *Venus and Adonis*, because the latter sets a precedent of figuring textual violations as physical violations in a more explicit way than the sonnets do. The longer epic poem gives Shakespeare the opportunity to more fully "anatomize" the physical effects of poetry and writing upon the body, providing several lucid examples of the way "erotic practice is material practice." It is easy to imagine, for example, eager readers of *Venus and Adonis* responding with an increased pulse and a reddened face upon reading of Venus's "sweet bottom grass" and "round rising hillocks" (236-237), indeed even a jaded modern reader might respond in the same way. And since, as Michael Schoenfeldt has observed, humor theory concerns "how bodies feel as if they are behaving…describ[ing] not so much the actual workings of the body as the experience of the body," a poem like *Venus and Adonis* would capture the experience of ink on a page transmitting heat and lust to a reading audience. This is exactly the sort of "lewd and immoral book" that Jacques Ferrand warns of in the *Treatise on Lovesickness*. Such lewdness and immorality led to *Venus and Adonis* being hugely popular in Shakespeare's lifetime; it was printed in nine editions. This well-received poem sets a precedent for the public transmission of humorally charged texts, like the story of rape that flows from Lucrece's dead body, or the story of Troy's fall.

33 Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, 10.
“anatomized” in Hecuba’s body by a skilled painter. *Venus and Adonis* also demonstrates the destructive influence of such texts on the body of the person who receives them, offering an informative lens through which to view Lucrece’s rape and suicide.

*Lucrece’s* immediate predecessor puts sexual interaction between Venus and Adonis in textual terms as often as physical ones. While Adonis is not a woman, his position as Venus’s quarry feminizes him, and the text positions him like the other ruined women of the English tradition. Adonis's "tenderer cheek receives [Venus's] soft hand's print" (353). Adonis provides a skin, a parchment, on which she attempts to "assuage" "love's fire" with "Free vent of words" (334).³⁷ Venus’s lovesickness and humoral imbalance force her to try harder and harder to transmit her feelings, both sexual and textual, to her beloved. In this sense, Venus dramatizes the roiling lovesickness of the sonneteer as well as prefiguring the sickness that drives Tarquin to Collatine’s home to commit rape. The transformation of the dead Adonis into a flower, with its attendant "color, scent, and emotional valence" certainly recalls Shakespeare’s use of floral imagery in the sonnets and in the death of Ophelia.³⁸ Lovesickness gives rise to a text, which gives rise to more lovesickness or results in the death of the beloved.

What *Venus and Adonis* demonstrates about the contagion of text and sex, *The Rape of Lucrece* takes to a rhetorical and anatomical extreme. The profound influence of textual stimuli on the body pervades *Lucrece*, informing nearly every stanza, from

---

³⁷ Heather Dubrow uses the same term, i.e., "her body will be his parchment..." in her analysis of *Astrophil and Stella in Echoes of Desire*, 116.

³⁸ Harvey, "Flesh Colors and Shakespeare’s Sonnets," 321.
Collatine's inflammatory tale of Lucrece's virtue to Lucrece's darkened spilled blood. This epic poem presents the transmission of texts—oral, written and visual—as physical acts. *Lucrece* belongs to the same tradition of poetic, humoral violations of the female body as do the other ruined Petrarchan mistresses I have discussed previously. Examining the dynamics of textual influence on the body in *Lucrece* reveals the degree to which pen and ink figure themselves as extensions of the body, and therefore how women's reception of texts written by men amounts to the reception of the male seed. Additionally, the reading or hearing of such texts often results in transmission to the audience of whatever humoral imbalances inhabit their authors. Women's perceived physical interiority (and inferiority) make the complete expression of such humoral conditions difficult, if not impossible, once women have internalized them, so that their "blue blood" has "changed to black in every vein" (1454).

That stubborn imbalance, the permanent inscription of the body, defines the ruined woman in early modern literature. As the violated Lucrece scans a painting of the fall of Troy to find some expression of the deep sorrow she feels, she settles upon the "despairing Hecuba," described in the headnote above. Lucrece finds that Hecuba's painted expression characters her melancholic despair in the same way a pining sonneteer might character his heartbreak through pen and ink. However, the male and female versions of artistic humoral expression differ markedly. The word "anatomized" (450) shows the way sorrow insinuates itself into every word of Lucrece's story and every part of her body simultaneously. Tarquin, by contrast, expresses his humoral imbalance, transferring it into Lucrece's body, leading to her demise.
Like the Hecuba of the painting, Lucrece can express her sorrow through an artistic medium, but not completely. The rest of the story stays "imprisoned in [her] body dead" (1456), to be published only posthumously, like Ophelia's. Lucrece's ruin, too, begins with an oral text, passed between men, made flesh. The notion of Lucrece as a vehicle for the passage of texts between men is not a new one. However, Lucrece's role is not that of a mere conduit or vessel—like an inkwell, the fluids within, awaiting expression, lend her an important textual role, that of author. She writes the story of her rape in a letter then she punctuates that letter with the text of her own body. Through self-destruction she temporarily wrests the power of expression from the men around her, "restor[ing] her relationship to her family, even as she commits this ultimate defiance of the rules of privacy and female enclosure."39 Similarly, Hecuba, to Lucrece's tainted eye, represents a tragedy of male choler and lust, inscribed on a female body, and trapped within that body, causing its imbalance and decay. However, Lucrece seems to read Hecuba as an opportunity to demonstrate her own strength as well, offering to "tune [her] woes with [Lucrece's] lamenting tongue, / And drop sweet balm in Priam's painted wound" (1465-1466). Lucrece recognizes the power of expression to act upon the men around her, even if such expression necessitates her death.

While the male poet may use the vessel of the pen to rebalance his own humors (often at his mistress's physical expense), the mistress herself, like Pamphilia, becomes an indelibly inscribed page, a ruined artifact. Lucrece recognizes this disparity between male and female textual imbalance, as she begs Tarquin for mercy before he rapes her. She describes him as "a sea" into which "black lust, dishonor, shame, misgoverning"

have fallen "to stain the ocean of [his] blood" (652, 654-655)." By raping Lucrece, Tarquin releases his lust and dishonor into her body, where it will remain as "entombed," as her cries for help (679). During the rape, Tarquin "pens her piteous clamor in her head, / Cooling his hot face in the chastest tears" (681-682). While the verb "to pen" in this line means "to confine" or "to enclose," the use of this particular homonym resonates keenly with the idea of a textual/sexual violation. As Tarquin "pens" the story of her rape, he cools his own body and rebalances himself. Lucrece has no such recourse.

Collatine makes the same mistake with his wife in *The Rape of Lucrece* that Polonius makes by publishing his daughter's chastity. His "parroll, or influence of Rhetoricke" does in fact generate Tarquin's desire to rape Lucrece, but it does so in more than a figurative or rhetorical way. 40 Like the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets, Tarquin's "lust…reduces him to the level of an animal who swallows a poisoned bait; swallowed, the bait drives him mad, his higher reason overcome by his base bodily appetites." 41 Collatine's descriptions of his "rich jewel" affect Tarquin's balance of humors through the avenue of his ear. The poem's narrator warns, "For by our ears our hearts oft tainted be," a sentiment with which Hamlet would wholeheartedly agree. Like Hamlet, Tarquin seeks a way to rebalance his humors, to "quench the coal which in his liver glows" (47). The method he chooses to effect that rebalancing is a forced inscription of Lucrece's body.

41 Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 105. Rackin is describing the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets here, but the description, significantly, works for either man.
Of all the paleographic materials that contribute to the physiological import of a given text, ink is the one that works the most potently in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Many critics have explored the relationship between bodies and manuscripts in *Lucrece*, but most fail to explore this most intimate of fluids, without which none of these ideas, abstract or concrete, would be legible. For example, Margreta de Grazia has likened the folded, sealed letter that Lucrece addresses to her husband to Lucrece's chaste body, focusing on the imprinted wax of the seal. This union of textual material and the body reinforces Stephanie Jed's explanation of the importance of uniting the physical experience of a manuscript with the interpretive, abstract experience of it, including contemporary perceptions of the sensual qualities of particular hands. However, in doing so, she, like de Grazia, Goldberg, and others, neglects the fluid that fills the pen and stains the paper.

The twin violations that transform Lucrece's body into a stained, white page to be read—Tarquin's rape and her suicide—inextricably conflate texts and bodies in a way that highlights the role ink plays in their union. Lucrece becomes a physical, textual product in the course of events the poem describes. As Margaret Rice Vasileiou has observed, Tarquin "reads [Lucrece] as an emblem of Collatine's power and rights, approaches her bedchamber, and then, by rape, encloses himself in that poem." Vasileiou, expanding on Nancy Vickers's ideas about the importance of the heraldry metaphors, writes of the power such metaphors have to incite Tarquin to violence. I would add to this idea that the warring red and white in Lucrece's white face make of

---

42 de Grazia, "Imprints: Shakespeare, Gutenberg, and Descartes," 42.
her face a rubricated text to be read and ingested. She becomes a living, breathing Petrarchan construct, "go[ing] beyond the metaphorical." 44 Ironically, in the process of becoming that, she undermines the construct completely. She transforms from an idealized white hart to a slaughtered doe in the course of this narrative.

In raping Lucrece, Tarquin does not seek to "surpass representation" or "transcend her metaphorical representation," he instead intends to equal them. He will, through his own silent, "inky loss," penetrate Lucrece as Collatine's text has penetrated him, create a new text that undermines the Petrarchan ideal. 45 The textual and sexual violations of Lucrece, like those of Ophelia, alter the Petrarchan conceit of the unattainable beloved in fundamental ways that reflect the inseparability of text and the body. Petrarch himself exhibited an awareness of the connection between handwriting and physical chastity when he wrote in favor of the antiqua script over the Gothic type of script that was "modern" in his time. 46 As Jed notes, Petrarch considered the antiqua style more "chaste" or "clear," unlike the Gothic, which "caresse[d] the eyes," thereby "afflict[ing] and disturb[ing] them." 47 Petrarch argues for a "chaste and clear" handwriting, but the sensual qualities inherent in any handwriting, or indeed in any print manuscript with an attendant history of human contact, always "clouds over the issue of chastity." 48 The text of Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece, with its distinct final image of

44 Calabresi, "Red Incke," 239.
45 Ibid., 55.
47 Ibid., 66.
48 Ibid., 67.
black and clear fluid spilling from Lucrece's body, puts the tension between writing materials and abstract thought into liquid form.

The rape and suicide of Lucrece demonstrate the conflicted relationship between the male text and the female humoral body in an even more dramatic and violent fashion than Wroth's poetic miscarriages or Ophelia's floral synecdoche. Lucrece provides the most chilling and extreme example of what exposure to the wrong sorts of texts can do to the vulnerable human body, particularly the female body. Lucrece herself emphasizes the textual and physical vulnerabilities of women as she tells her maid that "men have marble, women waxen minds," minds subject to "th'impression of strange kinds / … formed in them by force, by fraud, or skill" (1240, 1242-43). As in the sonnets, the female body becomes a defiled page, stamped wax, an open book, a site where the male text can flourish and reproduce itself.

In an extension of the way Shakespeare defiles his Dark Lady in pursuit of poetic procreation, the black fluid oozing from Lucrece's corpse enables Brutus and Collatine to produce the story of the Roman Republic. As Thomas Laqueur explains, "normal conception is, in a sense, the male having an idea in the woman's body." Laqueur evokes the metaphor of writing to explain the early modern concept of the male seed inscribing itself in the womb. He explains that the conception of a child in the "uterine brain of woman" aligns metaphorically with "the Word of the Logos 'informing' the world,…like the formation of a conception in the brain" (147). A logical extension of this metaphor easily includes ink as part of the "economy of fluids" in the human body, including blood and semen (103-105). Ink is the distillation of male sexual energy.

49 Laqueur, Making Sex, 49.
tainted by contact with the female vessel, whether womb or paper. No wonder then, that the tainted blood that flows from Lucrece's wounds at the end of "The Rape of Lucrece" takes on an inky hue, "some looked black, and that false Tarquin stained" (1743). In this stained blood, Brutus begins, in concert with Lucrece's husband and father, writing the republican history of Rome from the embedded story of Tarquin's crime.

The impassioned blackening of the Dark Lady to which the audience of Shakespeare's sonnets is privy also originates from a homosocial exchange of poetry. Shakespeare's speaker uses ink to penetrate the brain of another man to create an immortal offspring of ink. When the Young Man and the Dark Lady betray him, the contents of the poem become "a waste of shame," expressing bitter melancholy.

Shakespeare presents the body of the woman as already violated, and therefore unappealing as a fortress of virtue to assail—of course, having already received poems from the speaker, she is. The woman's body serves only as a poetic vehicle through which Shakespeare's speaker can verbally penetrate his male beloved, his "master-mistress," in order to procreate poetically (20). The dark lady loses her virtue inevitably through the rhetoric of love poetry, just as Lucrece loses her virtue in service of male history. Their bodies and the grammar of ink on paper coincide. Jed notes that the word "castigate" was often used in an editorial sense describing the removal of grammatical errors from a text. "Castigate" comes from the same root as "chastity." The body and the text overlap once again. In light of this usage, one could certainly

---


51 Jed, *Chaste Thinking*, 4-8.
consider Ophelia "castigated" from the margins of Hamlet's noble tragedy, or Tarquin "castigated," through the chaste womb of Lucrece, from the history of Rome.

Shakespeare's version of *Lucrece* defies what Jed calls the "chaste thinking" that divorces the sensuous qualities of Lucrece's story from its historical and cultural significance.\(^5^2\) Jed notes a "progressive alienation of truth from sensuous details" of Lucrece in her Italian sources—from Livy to Salutati to Machiavelli.\(^5^3\) On the contrary, in his plays and poetry, Shakespeare creates poetic bodies that are recognizably human, and therefore subject to physical manipulation by a variety of texts—poems, plays, stories, even paintings. Lucrece unwittingly sets her own demise in motion the moment she opens her eyes and ears to Tarquin's presence. A woman who accepts textual material from a man—poetry, letters, or speech—allows a transgressive penetration of her chaste body. As Mary Ellen Lamb writes, "Renaissance educators represented the chastity of women readers as highly contingent upon the nature of their reading...to exclude any works, especially chivalric narratives or books of love,"\(^5^4\) The text that Lucrece first "reads" from Tarquin is a chivalric tale of her husband's successes in war; however, Lucrece is obviously not in the habit of such reading. Her chaste reading habits betray her.\(^5^5\) Lucrece's inability to "read the subtle shining secrecies / Writ in the glassy margents of such books" as Tarquin's face, emphasizes her virtue, leaving her vulnerable at the same time (101-102). Honorable women like Lucrece were expected to read little, limiting their reception of texts from anyone other than their husbands.

\(^{5^2}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{5^3}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{5^4}\) Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle*, 9.

Despite that convention, Tarquin’s first violation of Lucrece is a textual one. Her inability to "moralize his wanton sight" leads her to internalize his words without fully understanding the consequences of doing so.

For Lucrece, the blazon of her body, as with that of any poetic mistress, works more than figuratively, creating a space for spoken and written words to penetrate piece by piece. Images of permeability abound in Lucrece, and reinforce the openness of the body to outside influences. As Tarquin makes his way toward Lucrece's bedchamber, he "steals with open list'ning ear" through several stubborn doorways. As the discussion of Hamlet in Chapter 5 establishes, open ears lead to disaster. The turmoil within him over the act he is about to commit wars with exterior sensations (283). The wind penetrates the house through "little vents and crannies of the place" interfering physically with his torchlight, metaphorically with his lust (310). The environment interacts with Tarquin's body continually; his "hot heart... / ...fires the torch" (314-15). He pauses in his progress to pick up Lucrece’s glove from the rushes, and a needle stuck in the glove pricks him, drawing blood, in an image reminiscent of Wyatt's pricked and bleeding mistress at her needlework. But Tarquin willfully misreads the text of "all these poor forbiddings" and continues on his way (323). The memory of Lucrece's wide-eyed openness to his tales of Collatine spurs him on. The text and the environment conspire with Tarquin's body to write the story of Lucrece's ruin.

Nancy Vickers has noted how Tarquin's subsequent blazon figuratively opens Lucrece's body to his assault—"Rape is the price Lucrece pays for being described." I would add that literal ruin is the price any poetic mistress pays for being described.

---

Tarquin reenacts the textual violation every sonneteer enacts upon his mistress; he merely takes that violation to its literal conclusion. Tarquin's tales of Collatine's heroism actually pollute Lucrece's mind with deceit as a prelude to polluting her body. Nancy Vickers has discussed the dismembering power Collatine's boastful blazon has over Tarquin. Tarquin's tales of Collatine's heroism actually pollute Lucrece's mind with deceit as a prelude to polluting her body. Nancy Vickers has discussed the dismembering power Collatine's boastful blazon has over Tarquin. And while Tarquin's embellished tales of Collatine are not odes of love per se, they are designed to win the trust and affection of a virtuous beloved in order to conquer her sexually.

Shakespeare's descriptions of Lucrece from the lustful Tarquin's point of view echo what Fineman termed the "downward" progression of the sonnets—from the alabaster-and-jewel imagery of Petrarch's Laura to more biological descriptions of the feminine beloved. Tarquin's texts move from the tainting of the eyes and ears to the tainting of the heart and soul, to the complete degradation of the female body. As Tarquin observes the sleeping Lucrece before he ravishes her, he first describes her as a "virtuous monument," true to Petrarchan form, but the imagery changes as Tarquin's lust grows (391). Upon her white hand, grounded on the fertile green of the coverlet is "pearly sweat resembling dew of night" (l. 396). The choice of simile, rather than metaphor, to blazon Lucrece, is a common one in this type of poetry; however, read through the prism of anti-Petrarchism, such a choice reinforces the qualities that render Lucrece realistically, rather than idealistically. The description of her hair "like golden thread," underscores the fact that this is not spun gold, but real hair, hair moved about by the breath of a living, breathing beloved (400, emphasis mine). Likewise, Lucrece's breasts appear "like ivory globes circled with blue" and the blue here does not connote

58 Fineman, "Shakespeare's Perjured Eye," 137.
the striations of cold marble but "azure veins," the conduits of blood and humoral fluids (407, 419). This beloved bleeds and sweats, so the sight of her incites both poetry and rape. This is not to say that Lucrece brings this assault on herself. Tarquin emerges here as a clear villain, as he must, to support the ideals of feminine and republican virtue that the poem espouses.\textsuperscript{59} However, Shakespeare makes a great deal more of the consequences that can arise from a seemingly innocent textual exchange when the word and the body exist so closely. Shakespeare's \textit{Lucrece} defines chastity as a function of textual interactions. In doing so, the poem puts forth in explicit detail, the real project of Petrarchan love poetry—to dismantle the very paragons of virtue it purports to uphold.

The way Shakespeare renders Lucrece's story, in intimate and textual terms, emphasizes the contemporary idea that in the world of the humoral body, an innocent textual exchange cannot exist, especially not for a woman. As Lucrece pleads with Tarquin, "Mar not the thing that cannot be amended" (578), she recognizes that the forcible expression of his lust upon her body will create an indelible stain. The use of the word "amended" here again invokes the inseparable nature of the text and the body. Contemporary usage of the verb "amend," included not just the correction of faults or sins, but also the correction of texts, or emendations.\textsuperscript{60} To demonstrate the symbiotic nature of bodily fluids and inky words, the aftermath of Lucrece's rape consists of an overflow of speech, a soliloquy on her betrayal lasting for over 300 lines of text. Among those lines, which arise from the "load of lust" that Tarquin has left behind, lurk many textual links between the defiled body and ink on paper (734).


\textsuperscript{60} See "Amend, v.," \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} online.
Lucrece imagines her guilt affecting her appearance "like water doth eat in steel," engraving her shame on her face for others to read, in much the same way a printer would engrave plates to produce texts (755). She laments that the "light will show charactered in [her] brow / The story of sweet chastity's decay" so clearly that even "the illiterate… / Will quote [her] loathsome trespass in [her] looks" (807, 810, 812). Lucrece imagines her ruin in terms of personal legibility to others. The word "charactered" again invokes the idea of writing as revelatory of a person's inner humoral state. The site of these characters, her brow, a body part so often blazoned in the Petrarchan tradition, becomes the page on which the story of her ruin will be written. If men are books to be read (or misread, in the case of Tarquin), then women are books in protective covers, sealed, and placed on the highest shelf of a man's library.61 Once uncovered, read, marked in the margins, women are ruined, and their ruin manifests itself as a textual condition. Lucrece speaks of her ruin in textual terms because "Poor women's faces are their own faults' books" (1253). In other words, even if a woman can muster the will to take pen in hand and amend the text of a particular violation, the book of her body is still hopelessly blotted.

In Lucrece, female collaboration gives rise to a text that seeks to "amend" the story of Lucrece's rape, yet complete "castigation" of the text proves impossible. Male homosocial collaboration is of course common to the period, as Jeffrey Masten argues, and as Shakespeare's sonnets demonstrate.62 Such collaboration between men often ends happily and productively, as in Shakespeare's Two Gentlemen of Verona. In this

---

62 Masten, Textual Intercourse, 45.
play, a homosocial textual exchange brings an attempted rape episode to a comic ending. In the sonnets, as I discuss in Chapter 2, the same type of exchange leads to a type of poetic, neo-Platonic reproduction. Female collaboration, however, can only lead to inevitable tragedy. Lucrece’s maid, the first person to see her after the rape, indeed immediately reads Lucrece’s sorrow upon her face, if not its cause. Perhaps, like Lucrece just one day before, she is virtuous, and is not a sufficiently experienced reader to divine such a story. The two women then share tears, the maid’s eyes welling up in unconscious sympathy. This homosocial exchange of fluids results in a collaboration that leads directly to the next act of writing in the poem. Lucrece’s first command to her maid that morning is to “get me hither paper, ink, and pen,” so that she can send word to Collatine to come home (1289). She takes charge of the pen in order to correct (or castigate) the story of her violation in the only way she feels is possible. Like Dido, she writes her own tragic ending.

Also like Dido, Lucrece’s final text appears not on paper, but on her corpse. The final publication in Lucrece occurs in the final stanza as Collatine, Brutus, and Lucretius "conclude to bear dead Lucrece thence, / To show her bleeding body through Rome, / And so to publish Tarquin’s foul offense" (ll. 1850-52). So this epic poem of rape and bloodshed begins and ends with publications of the female body, one chaste and one castigated. The transmission of ink between men, whether in poetry or government, elevates sexuality and transcends the body. On the other hand, once the male spirit enters the female body, it quickly cools and loses its creative spark. The economy of ink between men and women requires a purification of the female body like the castigation

63 Ibid., 45-49.
of errors from a written text. A described body becomes an inscribed body, and inscription leads to ruin. To return to Hamlet, as Ophelia reads a book to "color [her] loneliness," the traitorous Claudius remarks, "The harlot's cheek, beautified with plastering art, / Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it / Than is my deed to my most painted word" (3.1.45-46, 52-54). The likening of the word to an impure woman reinforces the symbiotic relationship of text and sex. Like Lady Mary Wroth, Ophelia, the Dark Lady, and Lucrece emerge from the male poetics of the body not immortalized, but ruined.
CHAPTER 4

PUTTING THE X IN TEXT: TEXTUAL SEXUALITY IN THREE SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDIES

...thither write, my queen,
   And with mine eyes I'll drenk the words you send
       Though ink be made of gall.

—William Shakespeare, Cymbeline, King of Britain

As I discuss in the two previous chapters, early modern English poetry adds biological elements—blood, sweat, and other humoral fluids—to the marble, bejeweled female monuments of love created in Petrarchan poetry. When a poet addresses amorous poetry to a woman, he does not merely attempt to control her body figuratively, but physically.\(^2\) Judging from Posthumus' plea to Innogen in the headnote above, the same physicality potentially infiltrates a woman's writing to a man. The masculine poet/writer, like Sidney's Astrophil or Shakespeare's sonneteer, expends some "spirit" in the form of the ink on the page, spirit that will then influence the body chemistry of a reader as he or she "drenks the words [he] sends." Because of the humoral qualities of ink, the exchange of texts between poetic/dramatic characters amounts to an exchange of fluids. Such conversation can be, like Collatine's unwise disquisition on his wife's virtue, as potent and physically inflammatory as the act of sex, as nourishing and intoxicating as food and drink. The exchange of writing between characters serves to both prefigure and refigure sexual intimacy in poetry.

---


On stage such an exchange can also replace or stand in for sexual contact, as in Posthumus and Innogen’s example above. The letters represent conversation between characters in the modern sense of "Interchange of thought and words; familiar discourse or talk," but also in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century usages that include "commerce, intercourse, society, intimacy," as well as "sexual intercourse or intimacy." I argue in this chapter that the physically potent quality that early moderns attributed to writing influences the preponderance of letters, documents, and books on the early modern stage as much as the "unprecedented ascendancy" of writing and printing in the culture at large. While Shakespeare’s "extraordinary reliance on writings in his plays" probably does arise in part from cultural logocentrism, we should also note the way such writings influence the bodies of the characters on stage and deliver information about the characters’ particular humoral conditions. The influence that texts exert over the characters that produce and exchange them, comes, in large part, from the powerful cultural associations between ink, the body, and the natural world.

Letters exchanged and read on stage act as a sexual surrogate in Renaissance drama. The way written words function in the comedies confirm that ink facilitates both metaphorical and physical transmission. Much of the scholarship on early modern authorship and collaboration focuses on historic letters, poems, and plays that real people exchanged and on which real playwrights collaborated. In contrast, this chapter

---


examines the representations of such exchanges between characters within the dramas of the period, placing those exchanges in the context of early modern ideas about the biological project of writing. Just as in the variety of written exchanges of the period, the representation of writing within the plays "emerge[s] within larger rhetorics of sex/gender that [are] both reflective and productive of their culture and its institutions." Letters, poems, and books, like Maria's forged missives in *Twelfth Night*, or Armado's overwrought protestations of love in *Love's Labour's Lost*, serve as more than vehicles of exposition. The close cultural link between writing and paternity provides one explanation for the sexual implications of textual exchange as dramatized in the plays. The meaning of the word "author" during the early modern period goes beyond the modern sense of "a writer of a book or books," and absorbs the additional meanings of "a director, ruler, commander," as well as, "One who begets, a father, an ancestor." So in usage and in staging, the authors and fathers of texts are interchangeable. Textual mothers, of course, become more problematic but no less important bearers and receivers of inked words. Letters onstage present sexuality simultaneously in terms of authorship and paternity, penetration and maternity. Letters can address cultural anxieties about paternity and cuckoldry. They also attempt to make visible the invisible processes of the womb because "due to both the construction of the female body and the biological realities of early modern life, there was no guarantee for paternal continuity." The three Shakespearean comedies I analyze in this chapter use letters and writing as a guiding metaphor to address perplexing unknown properties—paternity

---

7 Ibid., 64.
8 Bruckner, "Ben Jonson's Branded Thumb and The Imprint of Textual Paternity," 110.
and virginity—and their attendant cultural anxieties. Letters work so well to address these anxieties because the inkwell and quill, along with the murky fluid within them, link writing and the body in inextricable ways.

As I note in the introduction, ink, like the humors themselves, was a product of concoction—manufactured using plant materials, liquid, and heat in proper balance. Therefore, ink served as a potent vehicle for bringing the processes of the body out into the open. For example, in *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby mischievously advises Sir Andrew Aguecheek to use "the licence of ink" to inflame the choler of Cesario in a letter of challenge (3.3.37). The word "licence" here certainly does mean "freedom" or "leave or permission." However, considering the speaker of this line and the highly anatomical description of the writing that follows, the word "licence" here also takes on the connotation of "licentiousness," with which it shares a root, as well as that of "allow[ing] liberty, free range, or scope to." This letter should invade the body of its intended audience and cause changes in temperament within that body. Sir Toby advises that Sir Andrew's letter contain "gall enough in [his] ink" to incite Cesario because the youth, "if he were opened" would lack "so much blood in his liver as will clog the foot of a flea" (3.3.41, 52-53). The word "gall," like "licence," carries two meanings here. Gall describes the oak galls used to make ink, and also the bile secreted by the liver. The substance of the letter arises from the body and the natural world and therefore can exert a powerful influence over the body, especially a weakened, "opened" one, like Cesario's. Sir Toby's language here is revealing in the way that it feminizes Cesario in terms of his vulnerability to textual influence. Sir Andrew himself later describes his own

---

9 See "licence" and "licentious," in *Oxford English Dictionary* online.
10 Ibid.
missive as having "vinegar and pepper in't" (3.4.128-129). The letter may act upon the
body as much as any edible substance—in this case, substances that specifically
stimulate choler, a humor associated with masculinity.

The written word, like food and drink, is a "medi[um] through which [the four]
elements enter human bodies and so influence human conduct." Exchanged in the
context of a world informed by humor theory, any text that could enter the ears and eyes
had the potential to change the very composition of one's body. In this instance, the
letter itself is endowed with the ability to masculinize Cesario, fundamentally altering his
temperament, and by extension, his gender identity. As this incident from Twelfth Night
shows, letters and other texts, such as poems, short plays, or books, serve as important
tropes of personal exchange in plays. The passage of writing between characters
creates sexual intimacy and exposes hidden transgressions. The letters, books, and
mini-plays of the early modern drama expand, contract, and even collapse the physical
boundaries of characters' and actors' bodies. The abundant letters, notes, books and
poems in three of Shakespeare's comedies: Twelfth Night, Love's Labour's Lost, and As
You Like It, demonstrate the way ink works onstage to make explicit the sexual and
humoral exchanges between characters, thereby making explicit the textual violations
inherent in the English Petrarchan tradition.

The dialogue and the use of written documents in Shakespeare's plays highlight
the intersection of the text and the body, demonstrating the way a vessel of ink can
"bear more than analogical relation to liquid states and forces of the natural world." For example, Nathaniel, the over-read (and perhaps overfed) curate of Love's Labour's

---

11 Schoenfeldt, Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England, 3.
12 Paster, Humoring the Body, 6.
Lost, describes Dull's ignorance as resulting from not having "fed of the dainties that are bred in a book, [or having] eat paper [or] drunk ink," so that "his intellect is not replenished..." (4.2.21-23). Nathaniel also describes the way all of his and Holofernes' reading and study causes their intellectual "parts" to "fructify" in them—a metaphor of fertility and reproduction that recalls Sidney's "fruitful showers" at the beginning of Astrophil and Stella. Given the biological, even medicinal/poisonous, qualities that much early modern love poetry ascribes to the written word, the exchange of such written texts on the stage must signify to their audiences in terms of gender and sexuality. These exchanges would have been infused with sexual and reproductive power for early modern audiences. The multitude of fraught textual exchanges that occur within these three comedies reveals that these exchanges of letters and books add a physical dimension to the characters' relationships in much the same way that the love poetry of the period adds physicality to Petrarchan ideals.

The Petrarchan (and anti-Petrarchan) elements in Renaissance drama carry on the biological project of the contemporary poetry. Just as Surrey's Tower-bound late poetry examines the physical consequences of poetic, courtly verse, the plays, comic and tragic, examine the physical consequences of romantic entanglements—deaths, pregnancies, and imprisonments abound. In these dramas, events that begin in the world of Petrarchan fantasy end with the body. The hypothetical lovers and beloveds of the sonnet sequences evolve into flesh and blood actors on the stage. Words and physical existence collide in explicit terms. The lovers and mistresses of the drama embody the playwright's words on stage and transmit them to an audience of

consumers. Add to this wordy contagion the fact that the "mistresses" of the drama were actually young male actors, and the problems inherent in unqualified Petrarchan admiration compound considerably. The inked words of the script reach the audience through the medium of an actor's body. The physicality of that body is more than an idea—it is a tangible presence, filtering the humoral content of the play's words. Letters, books, and poems that appear on stage with those bodies further alter the audience's perception of them. The text governs the body; the body makes the play. Plays represent a "conjunction of the sexual and ontological impurities that inhere in theatrical practice," and the main site of that conjunction is the written word. The drama of the period therefore interrogates Petrarchanism in a variety of ways, but most tellingly through that powerful fluid "made of gall" and the books and letters composed from it.

Shakespeare's comedies experiment with writing as a sexual vehicle. Mishandled or forged letters cause chaos in the reproductive economy, pairing lovers of the wrong class or gender, only to reorder it, in true comic fashion, by the end of the play. The complicated bodies of boys playing women playing boys, as in the cases of Viola/Cesario or Rosalind/Ganymede temporarily disturb gendered behavioral and textual expectations. As You Like It, Twelfth Night, and Love's Labour's Lost each offer opportunities for women to write letters to men, to disseminate texts, to elide the gendered division between receiving and directing words. Even though misdirected writing, like poetry that reaches the wrong mistress or letters that reach an unintended reader, usually corrects itself by the plays' ends to uphold the patriarchal order, such writing still highlights the inescapable relationship between writing and bodies, often

14 Nora Johnson, "Body, Spirit, Stage, and Sexuality in The Tempest," ELH Vol. 64 No. 3 (Fall 1997), 688.
using that relationship subversively. For example, in As You Like It, Rosalind may mock Orlando's crude Petrarchan verse, but she does pull his inscriptions down from the trees, read them, and accept his affections. She enacts, before an audience, the textual violation that the poets such as Sidney and Wroth describe in their verse, thus magnifying the power that inked words can wield over the body.

Rosalind's actions demonstrate the penetrative nature of Petrarchan verse by staging the mistress's internalization of a sonneteer's words. In effect, her acceptance of Orlando's humoral verse, along with her return to a more conventional femininity, dramatizes the humoral flux that Shakespeare's sonnets describe, and which I discuss in Chapter 2. Once Orlando and Rosalind are married, the idealized, Petrarchan exchange will necessarily devolve into an inferior (both in a neo-Platonic and gendered sense) but necessary biological exchange. This trajectory echoes that of the sonnets—Orlando's affection and lust for Rosalind feminize him. He expresses that imbalance, disseminating text in the woods for the temporarily masculine Rosalind to receive. She accepts the text, and her return to conventional femininity begins.

Onstage, as in the textual realm of the sonneteer, the clean, overt exchange of texts between men gives way to the untidy exchange of bodily fluids and occult creation within the female body. Because the female body provides the site of such exchange, the feminine roles in the plays embody the relationship between text and sex. Sexualized writing and reading highlight women's inextricable link to the natural,
physical world. Letters and books serve as botanically infused icons of that link; they reveal the humoral and sexual state of the characters that deliver and read them.\textsuperscript{15}

Just as sonneteers used sonnets to make a preliminary assault upon their mistresses' bodies, the exchange of letters also functions as a substitute for sexual interludes in the plays. The misinterpretation of epistolary and poetic romantic advances, along with promiscuous reading and writing, develop characters' sexuality. Certainly the proficiency with bawdy wit and the pen that \textit{Twelfth Night}'s Maria demonstrates in her prank on Malvolio suggests her proficiency at other types of intercourse. This same written mastery explains the lascivious Sir Toby's persistent attraction to her. Even a comedy like \textit{Love's Labour's Lost}, which resists the expected conclusion of weddings for all, traffics in equivalencies between writing and the body. The exchange of sexual puns, or "verbal friction" between the would-be scholars and their mistresses, reinforced by several overwrought love letters in the Petrarchan mode, enacts romantic pairings, even if it does fall short of the marital conventions that the other two plays reinforce.\textsuperscript{16}

The need for penance before the marriages in \textit{Love's Labour's Lost} arises from textual exchanges; therefore, the play upholds the connection between sexual and textual transgressions. All three of these plays also use letters and poems to maintain conventional, acceptable sexuality between wives and husbands. Despite the premarital textuality of the above examples, the righting (pun intended) of all the confusion at the


\textsuperscript{16} Greenblatt, \textit{Shakespearean Negotiations}, 89. I contend that the biological properties of ink take such sexualized dialogue a step further, into the realm of actual physical contact between characters/actors.
end of any comedy generally culminates in the exchange of wedding vows, the ultimate exchange of words for sex. By accepting and/or reciprocating her suitor's letters, a woman indicates her willingness to accept her suitor sexually. On the one hand, writing from a socially appropriate suitor to an available and sanctioned mistress makes explicit the marital sexuality to follow. On the other hand, the misdirection of letters, as in Love's Labors Lost, results in fornicating perversions and miscarriages. Letters between socially unequal partners, like Malvolio and Olivia (or Maria's representation of her) lead to failed or ridiculous courtships. These plays use the sexual power of the written word as a source of comedy, for example laying bare the clichés in Armado's letters to the "base wench" Jaquenetta (1.2.54). Whether broadly comical like Armado's missive, or comically earnest, like Biron's lovesick poetry for Rosalind, such attempts to understand sexualities by exposing them in writing emphasize the contagious, potent physicality of ink on paper.

As You Like It, Twelfth Night, and Love's Labour's Lost use inked texts to examine, along with sexuality, the complications of male-female reproduction. These plays do this in a similar manner to Shakespeare's sonnets. Whereas the sonnets describe and demonstrate ink acting as a medium for the transmission of lust and humoral imbalance, the plays actually show that transmission in action. Textual exchanges onstage reveal the humoral body in conflict. As in the sonnets, characters shift from cold, wet femininity to hot, dry masculinity and back again, often through reading and writing letters and poetry. That is certainly the case for the would-be scholars of Love's Labour's Lost—determined to maintain a hermetic masculinity, yet doomed to producing melancholic love poetry after exposure to a group of verbally
proficient women. Stephen Greenblatt has argued that dialogue or "verbal friction" creates sexual tension and represents sexuality between characters of the opposite sex played by two male actors on stage.  

17 These inked texts in turn concretize the sexual contact between characters that the dialogue initiates.

Also, through the construction and dissemination of writing, the plays allow heroines like Rosalind, Viola, and the French Princess to sojourn temporarily in the textual, masculine world. The marriages symbolize the biological children to come after the letters, poems, and "sexualized punning," create physical connections between the characters.  

18 Like the sonnet sequence, the plots of the plays progress from a fantasy of homosocial and homoerotic reproduction to the reality of biological birth, a "less exalted, more excremental view of the body."  

19 The way the texts of the plays move from idealized virgin nature to the confines of the physical—especially the female—body parallels the way ink itself worked simultaneously as the medium of elevated poetry and a mundane bodily emission. Ink itself was a rarefied, mysterious substance, the various recipes for making it jealously guarded by printers. Yet, ink also had a reputation among printers as a curative elixir, "excellent for the treatment of cuts, bruise and burns," while "stale ink was used...for daubing on tumours, swellings of all kinds, ulcers and wounds."  

20 Some considered the linseed oil from which some ink was manufactured as a tonic for longevity. Furthermore, printers often consumed rolls fried in the linseed oil prior to mixing it with coloring agents. The starch from the dough acted as an

17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 772.
emulsifier. So the ink that composed the poetry for actors and audience to consume, that carried the high language of wedding vows and the low prose of rustics, was itself an edible, digestible substance.

The complicated relationship between ink's poetic significance and its biological origins presents a new lens through which to view the botanically named Rosalind, Rosaline, Viola and Olivia. All four of these women, like the men who eventually pursue them, keep to the fantasy of innocent homoeroticism and enforced chastity. The dialogue, action, and textual exchange within the plays serve as the mortar, pestle, and steeping vessels that can transform boys acting on a stage into women. Shakespeare relegates homosocial bonding and textual reproduction to the marginal spaces of nature or Green Worlds, then, he distills the sexual tension of those spaces into the inky blackness of feminine sexuality. The plays conclude in the murkier world of male-female procreation, either through marriage or, in the case of Love's Labour's Lost, the promise thereof among the principal characters (along with the revelation of Jaquenetta's pregnancy). Roses, violets, and olive trees, while lovely to look at and smell, must in the end be plucked and processed into liquid to remedy physical distress. After all, without a stock of black, feminizing ink, the "snow-white pen" has very little to do (1.1.233).

Part I: Ink and Roses: The Humorous Text in Love's Labour's Lost

Sexuality, writing, and reading signify interchangeably in the world of these plays as they do in the English sonnet tradition, particularly in the way they identify the spilling of ink with powerful female sexuality, markedly at odds with the Petrarchan ideal. For example, the proficient and witty writers/lovers of Love's Labour's Lost begin their

---

21 Ibid., 7-9.
relationships in service of scholarship and courtly propriety, and end them doing penance for lustful transgressions. Significantly, these transgressions take for the most part two forms: love letters and sonnets. The play begins with the signing of a masculine contract, one that will supposedly save the king and his noble friends from messy, female entanglements for three years. The activity of signing their names pledges the young men to take their sustenance, like Holofernes and Nathaniel, from the printed and written word in place of food, drink, and sex: "The mind shall banquet, though the body pine" (1.1.25). These young men look to printed texts for transcendence of the body, but instead find in them the seeds of bodily transgression.

The effeminate satirical character of Don Armado undermines the notion of inked repasts being anything but sensual, before the first scene ends. Armado's letter, invoking the sexualized sonnet tradition that will permeate the entire play, describes him as being "besieged with sable-coloured melancholy" or "the black-oppressing humour" (1.1.224-225). The letter goes on to detail the way witnessing a sexual encounter between Costard and Jaquenetta has "draw[n] from his snow-white pen the ebon- / coloured ink which here thou viewest..." (1.1.233-234). The sight of these lovers has not only made Armado melancholy, but has aroused his sexual desire for Jaquenetta. This spontaneous mini-play in the garden draws a written, response from its receptive one-man audience that is as sexualized as it is stylized. Armado expresses his arousal in ink and transmits it to a listening audience whose eyes and ears are wide open to his lovesickness. So begins a contagious cycle of the written transmission of fluids from character to character.
One key element of the transmission of humoral imbalances caused by lovesickness is the unintentional revelation of the contents of letters to characters who are not the letters' addressees. Early in the first act, for example, the king reads Armado's overblown melancholy letter aloud to all, effecting the contamination of each man, on and offstage, by the blackness of ink and the contingent symptoms of lovesickness. Letters like Armado's transmit images of blackness that promote the idea of a homosocial society of men distilling itself, through lustful thoughts and writing, into the realm of the female body. They create various writings, in the tradition of Petrarchan love poetry, with the intent of compromising their mistresses' chastity. The poems and letters, once read, will have begun the penetration that is their authors' ultimate goal. These men then unintentionally create lovesickness in one another, as each attempts to transmit that imbalance to the female object of his particular affection.

The performance of sonnet and letter-reading in *Love's Labour's Lost*, particularly in Act 4, Scene 3, meditates on the connection between lust and blackness as it examines the conveyance of the passions through writing. In Act 4, Biron, who in pursuit of Rosaline, instigates a great deal of textual mischief, describes the symptoms of such contamination. He offers a summary of the physical processes of the creation and receipt of poetry. He bemoans that he does "love, and it hath taught [him] to / be melancholy" (4.3.10-11). Biron then directly juxtaposes the resultant writing and his melancholy body for the audience. Holding the letter, he announces, "here is part of my rhyme, and here [touching his breast] my melancholy" (4.3.12-13). Biron echoes the humoral distress of contemporary sonneteers such as Nicholas Breton, and furthermore demonstrates the connection of writing to the lovesick body by using the visual
shorthand of clutching the letter to his breast. When he sighs, "Well she hath one o' my sonnets already," the audience is certainly meant to infer that a sexual indiscretion has taken place (4.2.13). Rosaline is likened to "pitch" for a reason, echoed as Biron describes his lovesickness as "toiling in a pitch" or trap (4.3.2). The reference to "pitch" could also describe the toils of applying black ink to paper in an attempt to win Rosaline's affections and sexual gratification.

After establishing this connection, Biron tracks his earlier love sonnet's progress from his body to the clown, the fool, and finally to the lady, then wishes similar affliction upon his comrades. Biron's letter in this way follows much the same path as Armado's. Biron, despite his armor of wit, falls prey to Rosaline's charms as precipitously as Armado has for Jaquenetta. He expresses his lust in the same type of overblown, innuendo-filled poetry. Fittingly, considering his testimonies on the beauty of Rosaline's blackness, Biron becomes the repository of the other lovesick courtiers' melancholy verses. Each man appears on stage reading his own sonnets to his particular mistress aloud. Biron is the one who listens to them all, exacerbating his own imbalance by taking in their melancholy verse. Biron's commentary on these loaded lines—"This is the liver vein, which makes flesh a deity," and "A fever in your blood—why then incision would let her out in saucers..." reinforces the overflow of physical lust onto the printed page, and from that page to the poet's secret audience (4.3.69, 93-94). No wonder then, after taking in the written lust of his companions, Biron must defend the blackness of his own mistress. Rosaline is "black as ebony" according to the king, and "To look like her are chimney-sweepers black," asserts Dumaine (4.3.243, 262). This cross-
contamination of lovesick texts explains the obsession with "blackness" that all the characters seem to share, in particular Rosaline and Biron, the chief wits of the group.

Biron's invocation of Rosaline's blackness serves a similar rhetorical purpose to the dark imagery of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130. Like Shakespeare's speaker, he creates in an anti-Petrarchan mistress an icon of his own lovesickness. Like the sonneteer who created him, Biron expresses great affection for his mistress, demonstrating her inherent contamination at the same time. For example, Biron describes Rosaline as having "two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes" (3.1.182). This must be the least appealing description of one's beloved since the black wires, dun breasts, and reeking breath of the Dark Lady. Nonetheless, Rosaline's appeal to Biron seems to lie in that very blackness. The king asserts that "[Biron's] love is black as ebony," to which he responds, "Is ebony like her? O word divine! / …No face is fair that is not full so black" (4.3.244, 249). I argue in my third chapter that, in the sonnets, the lady's darkness indicates the way her lover's verses have always already contaminated her. Biron understands this, yet Rosaline's verbal prowess and implied lack of virtue never dampen his desire to "love, write, sigh, pray, sue, groan" in pursuit of her (3.1.189). Like the sonnets, Love's Labour's Lost interrogates Petrarchism through the contrasting motifs of idealized lovers and feminine blackness.

Biron resigns himself to pursue Rosaline in the Petrarchan style, but the form that his admiration takes emphasizes her potential ruin as much as her beauty (3.1.189). The juxtaposition of Rosaline's black eyes with the ideal (which is to say "fair") mistress of Biron's poem reiterates the notion of ink on paper as a vehicle of physical connection. The sonnet ties the idea of blackness directly to the ink that transmits emotions from the
lover to the beloved and on to the audience. After she has received Biron’s letter, Rosaline’s own friends, the Princess and Catherine, describe her as "beauteous as ink" and as "fair as a text B in a copy book" (5.2.41-42). Rosaline does not argue with their characterization of her, but retaliates by comparing Catherine to a "red dominical," or a red letter in an almanac, and the fair Princess to a "golden letter," another type of textual marking (5.2.43-44). These women's physical coloring betrays their dark femininity differently than that of Rosaline or the Dark Lady; however, they still do not escape the textual marking of their respective suitors, or of Rosaline's contagious wit. The "name of the rose" in this play and others, conjures a particular sort of textual and humoral ruin, a uniquely feminine state that inflames poet/suitors even as it repulses them. The name "Rosaline" as it "travels from play to play" also connotes the ideas of ink and blackness as it charts a "trajectory from the fair Young Man to the dark lady." The rose in Rosaline conjures and cures humoral imbalances in much the same way that ink seems to do.

The quill and inkwell may present themselves as the province of melancholy men, but the fluid within the inkwell, like the "roses" (or violets or olives) within the plays, embodies a mercurial feminine power. Before moving on to the (much fairer, yet no less "blackened") Rosalind of As You Like It, I examine the properties of the rose these two characters share as their name suggests. Considering the rose as a simultaneous signifier of both the inkwell and the female body can explain the predominance of this name in conjunction with Petrarchan sonneteering and feminine sexuality. The rose

22 I take these definitions of the terms from the footnotes of The Norton Shakespeare cited earlier.
23 Jonathan Goldberg, Shakespeare's Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 268.
24 Ibid., 278.
complements the quill as a source of the textual and sexual power that women with this name wield within the plays. Interestingly, roses, like ink, had a complex humoral profile, many symbolic uses, and a physically affective nature. The third book of a 1633 expanded version John Gerard's *Herball, or General historie of plantes* describes the rose as a "shrub full of prickles, yet it had been more fit and conuenient to haue placed it with the most glorious floures of the world, than to insert the same here among base and thornie shrubs." Like the women who share its name, the flower is idealized and base, male and female, at the same time.

The authors of the *Herball* introduce the audience to the rose with an ancient Greek poem translated into Latin—their admiration of the flower is positively Petrarchan, invoking the flower as the one that crowns Cupid's head when he dances with the Three Graces. The humoral "temperature" of the rose varies depending on the redness or whiteness of the blossom, but while the red rose is more earthy and the white more airy, both are described as the source of a refreshing, bracing cure for ailments of the heart and liver. I reproduce the entire description of the "temperature" of roses here, as they correspond rather uncannily to the spectrum of black, red, and gold inks that Rosaline and her friends discuss.

The leaues of the floures of roses, because they doe consist of diuers parts, haue also diuers and sundry faculties: for there be in them certain that are earthy and binding, others moist and watery, and sundrie that are spirituall and airie parts, which notwithstanding are not all after one sort, for in one kinde these excell, in another those, all of them haue a predominant or ouerruling cold

---

temperature, which is neerest to a meane, that is to say, of such as are cold in the first degree, moist, airie, and spirituall parts are predominant in the White roses, Damaske and Muske.26

Whether fair or ruddy, dark or damasked, roses are predominantly cold and moist, like women. Yet roses, like other plants, contain enough other faculties to also become healing or purgative. Roses, importantly, have a particular association with lovesickness. Jacques Ferrand, in his *Treatise on Lovesickness*, suggests the leaves and petals of roses as a suitable mattress filling for those afflicted with lovesickness, and Gerard and Johnson assert that the "distilled water of roses is good for the strengthening of the heart & refreshing of the spirits."27 28 Ink, another distilled herbal product, appears to be good for the same type of healing, even as it infects. The *Herball* also offers the historical tidbit that many Turks believe the rose to have arisen from the blood of Venus, while other "Mahometans" swear that it came from the sweat of Mahomet.29 The rose finds its origin in the blood of love and the sweat of patriarchal religion. The ink in the pens of sonneteers arises from a similar admixture—botanical fluids meet bodily fluids, and both work together to express patriarchal ideas of love. The "name of the rose" reflects the humoral temperature as well as the consequences of the act of generating and receiving writing.

The consequences of such generation and reception, however idealistic the poet's intent, are always physical in nature. In his pivotal essay on Shakespeare's

26 Ibid., 1263.
28 Gerard and Johnson, *The herball, or Generall historie of Plantes*, 1263.
29 Ibid., 1260.
sonnets, "Shakespeare’s ‘Perjur’d Eye,’” Joel Fineman argues that the sonnets move hierarchically from heart to eye and from male to female, to reach a neo-Platonic reconciliation of binaries. Sonnets, as an idealized written expression of sexual urges, may attempt to reconcile the binary of art and nature, the poem and the physical body. The results of that attempted reconciliation, however, are anything but Platonic. In the English tradition, Wyatt’s *Noli me tangere* becomes a rule to be broken rather than followed because writing and touching for Wyatt and his successors amount to degrees of the same thing. Petrarch himself may have only admired his white hart briefly and from afar, but in the English tradition, lovers and sonneteers seem to prefer their deer slaughtered. The process of writing about one’s beloved and broadcasting her virtues to others are the first steps in the process of deflowering her.

**Part II: The Tears of a Stag: Melancholy, Poetry, and Writing in Arden Forest**

As in *Love's Labour's Lost*, neo-Platonic, Petrarchan discourse in *As You Like It* undergoes a metamorphosis into physical lust and lovesickness through the vehicle of written expression. Petrarchan commonplaces pervade the play; however, these tropes become the subject of mockery even as they serve their purpose of wounding pursued lovers. No character promotes the physical consequences of romantic verse more than Jaques. Though not himself a lover, Jaques observes and interrogates poetic convention, simultaneously becoming a victim of melancholy. As the embodiment of romanticized, melancholy suffering, Jaques, like Orlando's crude verse in *As You Like

---

It becomes the butt of jokes. However, he also delivers important truths about the potency of writing.

Early in the play, the wounded deer, a favorite image of the sonneteer, exhibits a blunt, physical reality that Petrarch's pure white doe, or even Wyatt's elusive prey in "Whoso List to Hunt," lacks. Jaques's stag, like most of the lovers in the play, is wounded, having "from the hunter's aim ... ta'en a hurt," and "heave[s] forth such groans / That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat / Almost to bursting, and the big round tears / Coursed one another down his innocent nose..." (2.1.34, 36-39). The graphic, physical character of the stag's wounds, the expression of liquid (tears) to try to soothe his pain, and the contagion of that pain to the melancholy Jaques, bring to mind the groaning, reproductive character of Sidney's Astrophil—"helpless in [his] throes," hoping to alleviate his own pain through the expression of ink. The liquefaction of the stag's pain and the subsequent transmission of suffering to a melancholy observer physicalize the process of writing Petrarchan verse.

Jaques takes on the deer's pain and "moralize[s] this spectacle...into a thousand similes" as any good melancholy poet would (2.1.44-45). Jaques elaborates the idea of expressing inner turmoil as both a poet and a fool, offering to "cleanse the foul body of th'infected world, / If they will patiently receive my medicine" (2.7.60-61). Of course, Jaques's sick, melancholy words would more likely infect an audience, rather than heal them, as Duke Senior points out. The Duke observes that Jaques's desire is not to heal others by "anatomiz[ing]" their folly, but to "disgorge into the general world" all the "embossed sores and headed evils [he] hast caught" (2.7.56, 69, 67-68). Jaques bemoans the sight of the suffering, wounded stag by the brook. However, before the
play's end, he proudly carries the dead deer to the Duke "like a Roman conqueror" and presents its horns as "a branch of victory" (4.2.3-5). Consummation and the (seemingly inevitable) cuckoldry that the "lusty horn" symbolizes, is a cause for mourning, as well as feasting and celebration. Jaques's hypothetical fool, like the melancholy sonneteer, seeks to infect and wound as much as to purge himself.

The transmission of words becomes a transaction of blackness, something that can be both healing and dangerous. Acting out Jaques's ideas of verbal contagion and blackness, the lovers in this play are no less affected by written declarations of beauty and love (even misdirected ones) than the witty courtiers of Love's Labour's Lost. All seem to suffer from a surfeit of ink and wounded hearts on their journeys to the altar. As You Like It demonstrates the impossibility of ideal, Platonic love because expressing such love requires that it be channeled through the body. In the process of writing, such a love must pass through the melancholy body of the poet, and enter the always already ruined body of the mistress, thereby becoming contaminated.

The play continually examines the friction between courtly convention and sexual reality, most often through discussions of text and sex. The poetic interactions between the play's characters underscore the impossibility of purity for the poet's mistress because the verse itself undermines that purity. Touchstone's bawdy parody of Orlando's verse after Rosalind's public reading demonstrates the blackening effect that the acceptance of such writing has on a woman. Touchstone uses metaphors of animal sexuality to emphasize the physical effect of the verse, despite its poetic pretensions. He begins, like Jaques, with the Petrarchan commonplace of the hart and hind, then moves along to mating cats, "lined" livestock, and harvested goods being transported to
market like so many prostitutes. In doing so, Touchstone completely reverses the neo-
Platonic trajectory of traditional love poetry. He moves down the Great Chain of Being
from woman to beasts to plants. Touchstone's "false gallop of verses" runs backward to
parody the pretensions and the effect of Orlando's verse (3.2.101).

Touchstone ends his comic diatribe, fittingly enough, with an obscene pun on the
"sweetest rose" that "must find love's prick" (3.2.90-100). Rosalind's name becomes a
symbol of sweetness and impurity at the same time, sullied by the very poetry that
celebrates her. Touchstone, the unapologetic lover of another dark lady, the "foul"
Audrey, proves himself a realistic critic of the limits of idealized, courtly affections in the
context of human sexuality. He courts Audrey harshly, questioning her virtue, and
staining her beauty in the most anti-Petrarchan words. He calls her a "foul slut," but then
admits that, while she is still not fair, her frustrating lack of poetic understanding
confirms her chastity (3.3.19-28). Like a comic version of Lucrece, Audrey does not
immediately comprehend her suitor's textual salvos against her virtue.

Touchstone reads (and admires) Audrey's lack of verbal and poetic mastery as a
lack of sexual mastery. A woman to whom no amorous verse has been directed is
necessarily a chaste woman. Audrey suffers from none of the accidental contamination
that afflicts and destroys characters like Lucrece or Ophelia. However, Touchstone still
tries to make Audrey into a more comely partner, despite her rustic blackness, and
despite insisting that his love for her arises from a "poor humour of [his], …to take that
no man else will" (5.4.56-57). All protestations aside, Touchstone makes Audrey into his
own sort of goddess. He corrects her bearing and posture more than once, even on the
way to the altar. He asks her to "Bear [her] body more seeming…" as he expounds
upon the minutiae of courtly arguments with Jaques (5.4.64-65). Touchstone understands courtly life and courtly love, and takes part in it even while dismissing it. He tries to raise the status of his low-born love even as he celebrates her simplicity. Touchstone demonstrates the social and sexual contradictions inherent in Petrarchan love, poetry, and writing.

The Petrarchan narrative of Rosalind and Orlando's love, like Touchstone and Audrey's, follows the sonneteer's trajectory. Their textual exchanges progress (or regress) from Platonic admiration, to physical imbalance, to inked expression, to conjugal connection. Both Rosalind and Orlando speak of being wounded by one another before ever making physical contact. This creates a mutual imbalance that begins the play's Petrarchan narrative. The sight of Rosalind wounds Orlando in the same way that the sight of the dying deer wounds Jaques. Also like Jaques, Orlando feels compelled to express his disease in a thousand (poorly composed) similes. After meeting Rosalind, Orlando describes his "better parts" being "all thrown down," and complains of "passion" that "hangs...weights upon his tongue" (1.2.215-216, 224). He combats this lovesickness, predictably, by writing poetry for his mistress in Arden, finding "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and the good in everything," to borrow the words of Duke Senior (2.1.16-17). The natural world of Arden provides the source material for Orlando to try and heal his melancholy. Not coincidentally, the elements of that world include pieces of writing embedded in the features of the landscape—books and sermons arise from the forest. The key to Orlando's healing resides in the botanical world, along with the oak galls, water, or perhaps the rose petals that will inform his poetry.
Just as the sight of Rosalind wounds Orlando, the sexual theatre of Orlando's wrestling match wounds Rosalind, throwing her into an imbalanced, melancholy state. Her verbal wounding in this scene recalls Don Armado's in Love's Labour's Lost when he stumbles upon Jaquenetta and Costard's garden assignation. Rosalind and Celia's conversation after the wrestling match demonstrates the way what she witnessed has affected Rosalind internally. Both characters use the word "wrestle" to describe Rosalind's emotional state on the eve of her exile. Celia begs Rosalind to "wrestle with [her] affections," and Rosalind replies that they "take the part of a better wrestler than [herself]" (1.3.18-19). The repetition of that word reflects the way that Rosalind has internalized Orlando's demonstration of physical prowess, and this foreshadows the way she will later take in his words.

Like the young courtiers of Love's Labour's Lost, Orlando and Rosalind have brief opportunities in Arden for homosocial and homoerotic inspiration. However, Orlando's expression of his affection in writing inevitably lowers the Platonic quality of their exchange to a more physical, realistic level. Rosalind's disguise as Ganymede allows her to have a brief man-to-man equality with Orlando. The two of them can share the idealized type of homosocial relationship, the "perfect union" that Montaigne describes in his "Of Friendship," in which "the seam which has joined them is effaced and disappears."31 Later, however, that peer relationship must change into the "constrained and compulsory" pairing of marriage and reproduction, despite its Platonic beginnings.32 In this way, the progression of Rosalind and Orlando's relationship mirrors

---

32 Ibid., 95.
the trajectory of Petrarchan verse—that which begins as an ideal becomes inseparable from the messy realities of the body. Verse, in other words, signifies a male response to humoral imbalance, while the physical sexuality such verse engages signifies feminine lust and weakness.

Once the textual conquest is complete, the verse harvested from the trees, Rosalind will become an "unexpressive she," a darkened inkwell, or a vessel for the incubation of male offspring. Until then, she enjoys a temporary textual and sexual equality with the object of her desire. Rosalind uses this temporary equality to investigate the power of the poetic text for herself. The written word, mainly in the form of the poetry Orlando inscribes on the trees, remains the province of men. The words of a man exile Rosalind to the forest in the first place. And the words of Orlando, combined with those of her father, return her to her proper subordinate role by the end of the play. For this play to have a happy ending in marriage, Rosalind must subjugate her spoken words to Orlando's writing. Significantly, Orlando's textual advances begin with a sonnet:

Hang there, my verse, in witness of my love;
And thou, thrice-crowned queen of night, survey
With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above,
Thy huntress' name that my full life doth sway.

O Rosalind! These trees shall be my books,
And in their barks my thoughts I'll character,
That every eye which in this forest looks
Shall see thy virtue witnessed everywhere.
Run, run, Orlando, carve on every tree
The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she. (3.2.1-10)

Orlando reiterates the connection between the physical features of the forest and written communication that the Duke establishes earlier in the second act. And even though Orlando alludes to the chaste Diana, like Collatine or Astrophil, he sullies his mistress’s virtue through the very process of extolling it, as Touchstone's parody clarifies. If Rosalind is the chaste Diana, then Orlando himself is the feminized, wounded stag. Only through the vehicle of poetry can Orlando rebalance and re-masculinize himself. Like Jaques, Orlando disgorges his lovesick passions through the raw materials of the forest. He thereby manufactures a text that is less than pure, with less than pure intentions. The sonnet serves to "emphasize the labyrinthine ways in which writing is caught up in the illicit and artful negotiations of courtship."33 The verse Orlando disseminates in the forest foreshadows the ideas he will leave in the body of his fair, chaste beloved.34 My choice of the word "disseminate" is no accident. The sexual relationship between Rosalind and Orlando begins with a verbal wound expressed onto paper. The project of affective writing renders the wedding bed a foregone conclusion. The journey from dissemination to insemination is a short one, especially considering the fact that the oak galls used to make ink are themselves a tool of sexual reproduction, the eggs of the female gall wasp. This play emphasizes the fact that sexuality is an inescapable component of poetry writing, down to the materials that make such writing possible.

Like Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the witty Rosalind of *As You Like It* interrogates the eroticism and melancholy of ink by marshaling her wit against Petrarchism. Ironically, she falls for the conventions of the poetry and internalizes its words, even as she mocks it. This Rosalind, also in the safety of the Green World, disguised as a "fair young man," devalues Phoebe the shepherdess as a poetic mistress. Nonetheless Silvius the shepherd doggedly pursues Phoebe. Through her interference in the "master-mistress" poetic transaction, Rosalind perfectly demonstrates the importance of ink to both the admiration and sullying of a woman's sexual character. Rosalind's cruel lecture to Phoebe about the latter's lack of desirability emphasizes Phoebe's blackness. Rosalind, unsurprisingly, chooses ink as the metaphoric vehicle to make this emphasis. Rosalind/Ganymede claims to see "no more" beauty in Phoebe "than without candle may go dark to bed" (3.5.39-40). She insults Phoebe by noting her "inky brows, [her ]black silk hair," and her "bugle eyeballs" (3.5.47-48). Rosalind's efforts here are designed to dissuade Phoebe's affections from the non-existent Ganymede, and perversely to encourage her appreciation of Silvius's suit.

However, the invocation of blackness here, as in Biron's admiring verse about the other Rosaline, only succeeds in further inflaming Silvius's affections for Phoebe. The confusion that Rosalind/Ganymede causes in the sexual economy during her interactions with Phoebe and Silvius underscores the power of writing to character sexuality and disseminate lust and lovesickness. Phoebe's blackness, like that of Shakespeare's Dark Lady, only renders the mistress more desirable to her suitor. Likewise, Rosalind's cruel observations somehow cause a swelling of lust and affection
in Phoebe rather than repulsing her. Rosalind’s "pretty redness" of lip and the "constant red and mingled damask" of her cheek, elicit a passionate letter from Phoebe, one that the stricken Silvius agrees to deliver "with all [his] heart" (3.5.121, 124, 137). The textual interaction between Pheobe and Silvius effects a reversal of gender roles that is more profound and more thoroughly physical than the Green World masquerades of Rosalind or the poetic exchanges between the courtiers of Love’s Labour’s Lost. Phoebe takes on a stereotypically male role and becomes a writer of love poetry—she pens a missive that expresses her inner blackness in hopes of seducing Ganymede. Although Phoebe's textual passion is meant for Ganymede/Rosalind, Silvius receives it first, and he is the one to suffer its effects. Silvius becomes the feminized receiver. As in Love’s Labour’s Lost, the sight of the rose leads to inflamed passions, which in turn lead to a love letter and the transmission of lovesickness to an audience other than the one intended. However, the textual exchange between Phoebe and Silvius in this play takes the study of blackness to an extreme, and the result is not a masquerade, but the complete confusion of gender roles.

Rosalind/Ganymede’s textual activities demonstrate both masculine control over the text, as well as the feminizing effects that unexpressed lovesickness has on men. Rosalind's suggestive homosocial friendship with Celia, on the other hand, highlights both the value of words and the frailties of the female body. Right before their exile in Arden, the dialogue between Rosalind and Celia broaches the idea that words constitute a form of female homosocial exchange that is similar to but distinct from the Platonic qualities of male homosocial exchanges. Rosalind's conversation with Celia reinforces their proper linguistic roles as women even as they break those rules:
Celia. Why, cousin, why, Rosalind! Cupid have mercy!

Not a word?

Rosalind. Not one to throw at a dog.

Celia. No, thy words are too precious to be cast away
upon curs. Throw some of them at me. Come, lame
me with reasons. (1.3.1-6)

The discussion of the value of words in this scene sets up a woman-to-woman exchange that seems to parallel the man-to-man reproduction of the sonnets. Celia notes the value of words, and asks to be "lamed" with Rosalind's explanations for her sadness. Rosalind takes the male position in this dialogue of throwing precious words at a willing female receiver. This small conversation prefigures Rosalind's transformation into Ganymede, and the androgynous power she has once in Arden. However, Celia's compliant reception of Rosalind's words reiterates the fact that this temporary reversal of roles is just that.

One of the best examples of the gendered power of the text occurs when Rosalind willfully misreads Phoebe's love letter to her, inserting herself forcefully into the text and aggressively reinterpreting it. First, she insults Phoebe's virtue by insulting the content of the letter and her hand. Rosalind insists that the words on the page are masculine, "a man's invention" and that Phoebe's "free-stone coloured hand" could never have written such a letter (4.3.25, 29). Rosalind then, like Biron in Love's Labour's Lost, meditates on the idea of blackness in a way that enhances the letter's sexual affect. She twists Phoebe's admiring words into defiance "like Turk to Christian," a simile that invokes the idea of a blackened other assaulting the fair people of Europe.
Rosalind reinforces the dark-and-light contrast of the expressed ink on paper. She also emphasizes the blackness of the letter in an attempt to prepare her listening audience for her particular, "manly" interpretation of the words. Rosalind insists that, "Women's gentle brain / Could not drop forth such giant-rude invention, / Such Ethiop words, blacker in their effect than in their countenance" (4.3.33-36). Like the other male characters in the play, Rosalind-as-Ganymede casts lust as a product a male suitor must expel onto paper to rebalance himself. She castigates Phoebe for presuming to disseminate text herself, and blackens Phoebe's virtue in the process. Rosalind, in this scene, exercises "a feminine poetics that appropriates qualities associated with the masculine… that mobilizes domination, that is pushy and imposing, that makes use of a sharp rationalism to puncture self-indulgent fantasy, especially fantasy of a Petrarchan cast." Within the homosocial fantasy of Arden, Rosalind practices masculine rhetoric and textual interpretation. After leaving Arden, however, she must surrender that power. Even as Rosalind dabbles in textual ideas, she simultaneously takes in the lusty content of all that she reads, risking her own chastity. As I note in my earlier discussion of Lucrece, silence and chastity are often linked in early modern texts, as are volubility and promiscuity. Rosalind's promiscuous reading here places her at risk of ruin. This Rosalind may be physically fairer than the Rosaline of Love's Labour's Lost, but she too dabbles in blackness before her journey to the altar ends.

Rosalind finds herself in precarious textual and sexual standing in this play. After all, Rosalind's willful engagement with the masculine text begins only after she finds

---

35 I refer here to the footnote gloss of this line in The Norton Shakespeare cited above.
36 See Stephanie Jed's discussion of the word "castigate" in Chaste Thinking, 4-9.
37 Paul J. Hecht, (Purdue University North Central), "Rosalind and Wroth: Tyranny and Domination," presented at the 2011 annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Seattle, WA, 4.
herself wounded by Cupid's arrow. Her body is opened to sexual contamination at the
sight of Orlando wrestling, and this opening leaves her vulnerable to his poetry,
however amateurish it may be. At her first encounter with Silvius, she observes, "poor
shepherd, searching of thy wound, …I…found my own" (2.4.39-40). Rosalind's open
wound allows Orlando's text access to her body. Significantly, Rosalind and Orlando's
relationship begins to evolve as soon as Rosalind reads the overwrought, Petrarchan
verses that Orlando has left in the forest. Like Collatine (without the tragic results, of
course) Orlando spreads the word of Rosalind's virtue, using the trees as his "books" to
"character" his thoughts so that "every eye which in this forest looks / Shall see [her]
virtue witnessed everywhere" (3.2.5-8). Like Lucrece, Rosalind becomes wounded,
exposed to sexual ruin by her lover's published verse. Orlando's verse, appropriately,
invokes "Sad Lucretia's modesty" as part of the tribute to his beloved's virtue (3.2.135).
Rosalind, unlike Lucrece, possesses the ability to see through the verses as a device of
seduction. However, this ability does not prevent her from reading the verses and
allowing them to "fructify" within her. Rosalind not only listens as Celia reads the verses
aloud, but also reads them aloud herself, prompting Touchstone to ask why she
"infect[s] [her]self with them" (3.2.101-102). Simply reading and sharing the poetry has
breached the confines of her virtuous body.

Orlando's textual conquest, through poetry, of Rosalind reinforces his masculinity
and affirms him as the hero of this play. The audience realizes Orlando's legitimacy as a
male hero from his first lines. He claims the "spirit" of his father within him as evidence
that he should not have to rely on Oliver for his well-being (1.1.21). When Adam
identifies Orlando as the "memory/ Of old Sir Rowland," he highlights Orlando's
 masculinility by linking him to the "idea" created in the mother by the father (2.3.3-4). The same-sex partnerships of Arden allow idealized, Platonic love to grow. Once the characters leave that world, they return to the realities of biologically reproductive marriages. "Significantly, the final text that Rosalind receives from Orlando is not of ink, but of blood. Oliver presents Rosalind with a "bloody napkin" as proof of Orlando's wounds (both physical and emotional) and his honorable intentions. The blood on the napkin, according to common Renaissance stage practice, would very likely have been composed of red ink. Rosalind reads this text, and immediately reveals the woman beneath the Ganymede disguise. Oliver notes her swooning and pallor and chastises her, "You a man? You lack a man's heart" (4.3.163-164). The sight of this blood, perhaps symbolic of the bloody bed linens of her imminent wedding night, brings Rosalind's masculine textual power to an end. The journey that begins with the wound of love and passes through the expression of ink in Petrarchan style, ends in the messy, bloody realities of marital sexuality. When Orlando publishes his dated, Petrarchan love poems on the trees of Arden, he has "an idea, an artistic or artisanal conception," and Rosalind receives those ideas into what Thomas Laqueur terms the "brain-uterus." Once Rosalind takes in Orlando's poetry, the audience knows that a physical consummation, beginning with this exchange of ink, will follow.

38 Laqueur, Making Sex, 52.
40 Ibid., 42.
Part III: "Her very c's, u's, and her t's…/ and thus makes she her great P's." The Sexuality of Letters in Twelfth Night

Let there be / gall enough in thy ink; though thou write with a goose-pen…"
—Twelfth Night (3.3.41-42)

The written interactions in Twelfth Night also use the Petrarchan love objects of the stage to expose the mutual effects of written word and body on each other. Twelfth Night departs from the other plays in that it argues the most forcefully for the use of the written word to facilitate socially sanctioned pairings among the young and amorous. The textual exchanges of the Twelfth Night carnival ultimately serve not to replace or elevate the necessary physical sexuality of the characters' lives, but to celebrate such sexuality in its proper place. Through its representations of Olivia and Viola, this play examines the physical consequences of making women into unattainable objects of art, and the verdict of this examination is that poetic ideals are more useful as a means to an end than as a substitute for intimacy.

The use of art and nature in tandem, particularly through the transmission of letters, leads through the carnival confusions of the play to its comic resolution—the result of which will necessarily be physical, "natural" unions between the major players. While Viola, disguised as a man, must defy the idealized behaviors expected of her as a Petrarchan mistress, Olivia falls victim to romantic stasis or limbo as a result of taking Petrarchism too much to heart, allowing no missives of love to penetrate her chaste body. At the beginning of the play, Olivia takes the narcissistic path of the Young Man in the sonnets. She wallows self-indulgently in sorrow and refuses Orsino's written and verbal advances. Olivia demonstrates a reluctance to accept a man's word or spirit, a
sin for which Viola chastises her: "...you are the cruell'ost she alive / If you will lead these
graces to the grave / And leave the world no copy" (1.5.211-213). The play argues that
Olivia not confine herself to such an ideal. She should be receptive to textual advances,
rather than closing herself off to potential suitors.

Olivia is a cold, unresponsive Petrarchan mistress to Orsino as the play begins,
but even Orsino's conventional praises of her invoke the body, lamenting that her "liver,
brain, and heart, / These sovereign thrones, are all supplied, and filled / Her sweet
perfections, with one self king!" (1.1.36-38). Olivia insists upon keeping her affections
private, solitary, devoted to her dead brother. In doing so, she makes herself,
consciously, into a constructed Petrarchan mistress. She blazons herself, taking on a
role that should be Orsino's. In response to Viola's imputations that Olivia must consider
procreation to do justice to her beauty, Olivia responds with a satiric blazon of herself,
"divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inven- / toried, and every particle and utensil
labeled to my / will: as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two gray / eyes, with lids to
them; item, one neck, one chin, and / so forth" (1.5.240-244). Notably, the inventory that
Olivia provides here is one true to biological standards, not Petrarchan standards. Her
eyes are not jewel-like, but gray. Her lips not rubies, but "indifferent red." She objectifies
herself upon receiving the male text, in much the same way that Shakespeare
objectifies the dark lady's red lips, "dun" breasts, and wiry black hair. In both instances,
the male text becomes less sublime as it enters the hidden recesses of the female form,
moving from head to eye to heart to the mysterious "and so forth" of the womb. And all
of this physicality in the end leads to her falling in love with Cesario/Viola instead of
keeping to her vows of isolation. Viola, too, as David Bevington observes in his
introduction to the play, "teaches [Orsino] to avoid the beguiling but misleading myths of Petrarchan love" through her use of masculine disguise.\textsuperscript{41}

Several scenes in \textit{Twelfth Night} build upon the idea of textual reproduction that the sonnets promote, by not only raising the possibility of such reproduction, but also advocating for it. This play, like the two comedies I have discussed thus far, and like the sonnet cycle, begins in the world of rarefied, poetic reproduction. But unlike the sonnets, the play unambiguously endorses sexual reproduction within the female body, despite its darkness and uncertainty. To stay mired in neo-Platonic ideals is to be, like Orsino, "fascinated by his role as melancholy lover."\textsuperscript{42} Orsino is trapped in a pattern of melancholic excess, as his opening lines attest:

\begin{quote}
If music be the food of love, play on,

Give me excess of it that surfeiting,

The appetite may sicken and so die. (1.1.1-3)
\end{quote}

He invokes the ingestible qualities of music, feminizing himself by comparing himself to "a hart" pursued by "desires like fell and cruel hounds" (1.1.20-21). His dedication to the idea of himself as an unrequited Petrarchan lover pushes him out of his proper role as pursuer and into the role of prey. Olivia's own "distempered appetite" can only be assuaged by accepting texts of love through the vehicle of Viola/Cesario's body, and then acting on the imbalance those texts create within her. Surely, it is not coincidence that Orsino compares the music he wishes to ingest to "the sweet sound / That breathes upon a bank of violets" (1.1.5-6). Orsino's simile emphasizes the violet, whose humoral

\textsuperscript{41} Bevington, \textit{The Complete Works of Shakespeare}, 328.

value I address later in my discussion of Viola. The violet, like the roses of Love’s 
Labour’s Lost and As You Like It, feminizes the botanical materials that go into the 
production of both humoral tonics and ink.

As with Rosalind and Rosaline, contemporary botany, the source of many ink 
and medicinal recipes, provides a compelling, natural explanation for the temperament 
and behavior of Viola and Olivia, as well as their receptivity to the written word. The fruit 
of the olive tree alone has a few virtues, but has many uses as a healing tonic when 
mixed with other flowers or herbs. Like its namesake Olivia, the fruit "yeelds little 
nourishment" on its own, but when pressed into liquid and married with other elements 
becomes healing and appropriately cooling and feminine.\(^{43}\) Interestingly, one plant in 
particular that can be used to make such a tonic is the violet. Steeping violets in either 
olive oil or almond oil, made a tonic that when "anointed vpon the testicles, doth gently 
prouoke sleepe which is hindred by a hot and dry distemper."\(^{44}\) Violets, like olives, had 
a cool, moist humoral character, which made them both good against "the sharpnesse 
of choler" and "extream heate of the liuer."\(^{45}\) No wonder, then, that Viola makes the 
perfect carrier of Orsino's distempered letters to Olivia, and no wonder he finds her 
presence, even in disguise, so comforting. Viola "hold[s] the olive in [her] hand" in more 
ways than one (1.5.185). When Olivia agrees to hear Orsino's message, she asks Viola, 
"Now, sir, what is your text?" (1.5.214-15). Olivia opens herself to a textual impression 
from a figure she construes as male. The boundaries she has erected against men 
begin to crumble with this question. The play presents the text as a male emanation that

\(^{43}\) Gerard and Johnson, The herbal, or Generall historie of Plantes, 1393-1394. 
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 854. 
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 852.
seeks a female receptacle. Viola, as Cesario, performs a complicated, gendered task by acting as vessel and disseminator of the message at the same time. She is "out of [her] text" indeed (1.5.227). While Viola inhabits this extra-textual, androgynous space, she echoes the voice of the speaker in the Young Man sonnets. As the master-mistress of this play, she, like Shakespeare's sonneteer, understands the value and purpose of written exchange. The logical end of these textual exchanges is male/female sexual intimacy.

Textual/sexual intimacy characterizes the relationship between Viola and Orsino from its earliest moments, and demonstrates the power Orsino's words have to influence Viola's body. After only three days, Viola/Cesario is "much advanced" in the Count's favors, and he has seen fit to "[unclasp] / To [her] the book even of [his] secret soul" (1.4.12-13). The object of Orsino's "excellently well penned" letter may be Olivia, but Viola is the one who internalizes the "unfold[ed] passion of [his] love" (1.5.154, 23). Viola has "taken great pains to con" Orsino's professions of love, moreover, she has internalized the writing herself prior to delivering her message. Orsino has become textually intimate with Viola before he ever realizes it. Viola, on the other hand, seems all too aware of the connection between herself and her master. When Olivia asks Viola "Where lies your text?" Viola answers without hesitation, "In Orsino's bosom" (1.5.197-198). She acknowledges that she has participated in a profound and physically altering experience by taking in a man's text. Because she is cross-dressed like Rosalind, Viola temporarily asserts the male privilege of textual exchange, but the text she takes in still affects her body in the expected way, turning her affections and desire toward its writer. As Orsino observes, "For women are as roses, whose fair flower / Being once
displayed, doth fall that very hour" (2.4.37-38). He might have more accurately
compared women to violets—delicate, beautiful, and salubrious to their beholders. Viola, all too aware of her textual vulnerabilities, simply replies, "And so they are. Alas
that they are so" (2.4.39). Once a woman has been assailed by a lover's writing, her
virtue made public, she will "die even when [she] to perfection grow[s]" (2.4.40).
Certainly the word "die" here carries a sexual connotation that emphasizes women's
vulnerability to men's words.

The traffic in texts between Orsino, Viola, and Olivia demonstrates a human
vulnerability to words that ultimately transcends gender, however. The character who
best demonstrates the power of writing to physically and emotionally alter its readers is,
ironically, not a woman. Malvolio finds himself feminized, lovesickened, and maddened
as the result of a skillfully written letter. Significantly, that letter's author is a woman,
which as with Silvius in As You Like It, deepens the feminization that results from
Malvolio's susceptibility to the letter's message. Maria's fraudulent letter to him provides
another example of the close relationship between writing and the body. Well aware of
the power of writing to affect a person's humors, she refers to her letter as "physic" that
"will work with him" (2.4.152-153). Later, Sir Toby describes the effect of her letter in
liquid, medical terms, as working on Malvolio "like aqua vitae with a midwife" (2.5.171).
Such a simile remarks on the similarity between inked words and a spirit or liquor while
simultaneously feminizing its victim. Fabian exclaims, "What a dish o'poison has she
dressed him!" as he observes the effect of the inked words on Malvolio's temperament

---

46 Gerard and Johnson describe the violet as follows: "very many by these Violets receive ornament and
comely grace: for there bee made of them Galands for the head, Nose-gaies, and poesies, which are
delightfull to looke on, and pleasant to smell to, speaking nothing of their appropriate vertues; yea
Gardens themselves receive by these the greatest ornament of all, chieuest beautie and most gallant
grace; and the recreation of the minde which is taken hereby..." The herball, 849-850.
and ego (2.5.102). This comic episode brings the intimacy of written exchange to the forefront by being overtly bawdy and satirical. The content of the letter, too, embraces the body as its central mode of attack. Malvolio lustily interprets his "lady's hand. …her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her great P's" (2.5.77-79). The obvious pun on female genitalia increases the sexual connotation of this particular piece of writing, and at the same time draws attention to the more subtle sexual content of other writings in the play. Maria's "obscure epistles of love" deconstruct Malvolio's body in a way that mirrors Olivia's satiric self-blazon earlier in the play:

…the color of his beard, the shape of his leg, the manner of his gait, the expressure of his eye, forehead, and complexity, he shall find himself most feelingly personated. (2.3.155-58)

The letter unites the written word with bodily objectification and enables a woman to render a man submissive. This written poison "wins him, liver and all" (2.5.86) as soon as he opens himself to it. Like Olivia and the Dark Lady, written words reduce Malvolio to the sum of his parts. Maria both conceives and disseminates the letter, in another "out of text," carnivalesque experience. Her capabilities with writing imply that she has sensual capabilities as well—the power of reproduction. As Viola observes in one exchange with Feste, "They that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton" (2.5.13-14). Sir Toby's fascination with these skills leads to their marriage by the play's end, a marriage that brings her powers of reproduction into their proper sphere, the womb rather than the page.
Because Malvolio eagerly accepts a woman’s text, the play feminizes him. However, like the masculine power of the women in this play to disseminate texts, Malvolio’s femininity is temporary. The objectification of Malvolio moves from the lower body to the upper, from the beard (often equated with male genitalia) and legs to the eye and forehead. Maria’s letter objectifies him from bottom to top, an ascent to the brain rather than a descent to the womb. The text compromises his masculinity to a degree, yet it still distinguishes him from the women. Also, the play affords Malvolio a limited opportunity to write against the plot to humiliate him—he calls for “ink, paper, and light” to redeem himself after being “propertied” and kept in darkness (4.2.110-11). In effect, he calls for a phallus, that familiar “snow-white pen” to rewrite the text of his manhood. The play does not allow him complete redemption, but Olivia does absolve him of his class and sexual transgressions, leaving him to plot his revenge. The women do not get this sort of absolution. The only way for them to set the world right is to marry and become “propertied” themselves. The physical effects of writing may transcend gender, but distributing it, at least in the world of these comedies, seem to put all the characters back in their proper social order.

Ultimately, all these exchanges of ink argue for a balanced mixture of poetry and biology, and present writing as a conduit of both. At the end of the play, Olivia, Viola, and Maria have seemingly relinquished the power of the text, abandoned their homosocial relationships, and committed to marriage. The textual sphere remains the province of men, and the women commit themselves to serving as receptacles, vessels in which the ideas of men can germinate. And yet, both parties find themselves drawn to the strange marriage of Petrarchism and procreation that characterizes early modern
concepts of sexuality. The ideals of poetry, or of the wedding vows, for that matter are merely prologue to the physical relationship to come. Writing bridges these two dimensions. The romantic trajectory of these comedies follows the trajectory of Shakespeare’s procreation sonnets—from male text to female womb. The text retains its place at the top of the hierarchy of ideas, but the necessity of engagement with the female body, carnality, and lust bleeds through like an overly acidic ink through paper. The use of textual/sexual imagery in early modern poems idealizes male-male textual reproduction because it circumvents the womb, yet the plays reveal this type of procreation to be a literary fantasy. Texts, like a "Lucrece knife" penetrate the boundaries of the body and change people from within, whether male or female (2.5.95). The combination of text with sex promotes the procreative and destructive power words can have over the frail human body. The problematic solution to the ambiguities of female sexuality, virginity, or pregnancy is for an author to recreate himself first in the (with any luck) immortal world of printed letters. However, in the end, that author must, like Jaques, kill the hart and embrace the horns as a trophy. Keeping the reproductive discourse between men offers a fantasy that an author can circumvent the tragedies of misdirected words, that he can discharge family obligations, that he can avoid miscarriage or cuckoldry, by procreating with male peers in the realm of text. But the plays show that the letters and sonnets work best when they work as a prelude to real, carnal sexuality, fearsome as that may be.
"You were an actor with your handkerchief! 
Which he most sweetly kissed in the receipt, 
And might, no doubt, return it with a letter, 
And 'point the place where you might meet…"

—Ben Jonson, *Volpone*\(^1\)

Part I: Written Violations: Tragic Letters and the Body

In plays like *The Spanish Tragedy, The Revenger’s Tragedy,* and *Hamlet,* mishandled letters lead to tragic endings as surely as having sex with the wrong person does. In fact, the exchange of ink between a man and a woman often prefigures a sexual liaison, or serves as evidence of impurity after the fact. Ophelia’s rejection of Hamlet’s letters is only one of many examples. As with sexual intercourse, written intercourse can miscarry, resulting in blood and violence. Bel-Imperia’s desperate letter to Hieronimo, written in her own blood, provides one potent example. Another example occurs in Middleton’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* as Lussurioso attempts to seduce Castiza by sending her "Many waxed lines, full of [his] neatest spirit, / And jewels that were able to ravish her / without the help of man…” (1.3.91-94).\(^2\) While the "neatest spirit" here could be glossed as "most intense feeling," as the note in the Norton Anthology indicates, "neatest spirit" could just as easily refer to unmixed humors, to the direct expression of passion onto paper, as in Shakespeare’s "expense of spirit in a waste of shame" in Sonnet 129. Castiza, however, being "foolish chaste" sends the letters back—refusing

---


Lussurioso’s advances and remaining pure. As in Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*, or as at the beginning of *Hamlet*, an oral text internalized leads to a humoral imbalance and a series of tragic inscriptions on paper and on bodies. The refusal of such a text amounts to a refusal of physical intimacy. Later Jacobean revenge plays, such as John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, and John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s A Whore*, take the written and printed word in an ever more anatomical direction. This chapter examines the variety of written miscarriages and violations that drive many early modern tragedies to their bloody conclusions in order to demonstrate the importance of ink as a physical signifier and a cultural marker of ambiguous feminine purity/impurity.

First, I examine the effects of letter writing and reading on several characters, including Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia from Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, and Corvino, Celia and the title character from Jonson’s *Volpone*. Second, I examine the role of humor-laden letters and their effects on multiple characters in *Hamlet*, and finally, I analyze the role poison letters and texts play in the gruesome Jacobean revenge plays of Webster, Middleton and Ford. The general effects of texts on the body in these plays follow a similar trajectory to the one I have established within the English sonnet tradition. The plays, like the sonnets, interrogate Petrarchan admiration of the body, and add sensual physicality to both the mistress and the poetic suitor. The writers and audiences of letters, poems, and even mini-dramas, within the tragedies thereby commit sexual transgressions. These sexual transgressions evolve into subtle physical assaults—"leprous distilments" and poisoned books that curdle the blood and kill on contact.

---

3 Jed, in *Chaste Thinking*, notes that the word “castigate” was often used in an editorial sense describing the removal of grammatical errors from a text. "Castigate" comes from the same root as “chastity” (5-8). Therefore, chastity is both a textual and a physical concept. This double meaning certainly informs Castiza’s name. She is textually and sexually chaste or “castigated.”
sexual potency of the written word leads the producers and consumers of these texts to tragic ends.

Letters and books served as vessels of biological transmission between dramatic characters, and indeed between real lovers, families, and authors, with "blurry boundaries between manuscript and print, and between private and public conversations." The cultural weight of written and printed words heightens their importance upon the stage, and infuses what might be mere stage properties with psychosexual value. Letters and books on the stage, represent more than any other properties, what William C. Carroll has called the "biological semantics at work in [Shakespeare's] plays," and serve as a "[mode] of discourse" that registers "the presence or absence of virginity." However, one type of metaphor Carroll does not discuss (importantly, since this metaphor can indeed render virginity and sexuality as a something) is the metaphor of the written word. Critical discussions such as Carroll's neglect the blank page, the unbroken seal, the impression of a signet ring on virgin wax. "Female sexuality…is invariably articulated as linguistic transgression," and I would add that the written word within the plays embodies such transgressions. Maidenhead is therefore expressible in patriarchal discourse as more than a nothing or a negation; it is a sealed letter, containing the ink yet to be expressed between lovers. For example, in Twelfth Night, the signet with which Olivia marks her letters depicts, of all figures, the tragically violated Lucrece. The device Olivia uses to seal up her inked desires captures

---


the paradox of chastity in a concrete way. Olivia must remain chaste, following
Lucrece's example; however, she must also unseal the letter of her body to her future
husband in order to fulfill her social role. The seal, and by implication, the inked words
inside the letter, warns against cavalier publications like that Collatine makes of his
wife's virtue. It also, as with any sealed letter or forbidden object, begs to be opened.
Inked texts render the complicated notions of both maidenhead and ruin visible to an
audience well-versed in the links between writing and the humoral body.

Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, a well-known predecessor of *Hamlet*, offers
many examples of exchanges of writing that indicate sexual exchange between
characters. This play sets a precedent for engaging texts and the body that the plays I
discuss earlier have followed. The relationship between the doomed Bel-Imperia and
Horatio becomes clear to the play's antagonists, Lorenzo and Balthazar, the same way
it becomes clear to the play's audience, through the evidence of letters. The
treacherous Pedringano offers Lorenzo proof of Bel-Imperia's liaison with Horatio,
saying, "She sent him letters which myself perused, / Full fraught with lines and
arguments of love" (2.1.84-85). Pedringano has inserted himself into their relationship
perversely, by intercepting Bel-Imperia's letters and sharing the contents with the
intended recipient. So the seemingly undeniable parentage of such a letter becomes
muddied, just as any product of the womb, with doubts and intrigues. The letter of proof
underscores the impossibility of proof.

With two male actors onstage, or with a man and a woman in an unsanctioned
relationship, only so much proof can be had anyway—whether in conversation or

---

letters. The plays surmount this limitation with dialogue and stage directions that emphasize the physicality of inked texts. The sexuality of verbal and written exchanges appears again as Horatio and Bel-Imperia "consummate" their relationship under the watchful eyes of Balthazar and Lorenzo. Horatio rhapsodizes his affections for Bel-Imperia, and confirms that "...with looks and words we feed our thoughts / (Two chief contents, where more cannot be had)" (2.2.3-4). Bel-Imperia asks Horatio to "Write loving lines, I'll answer loving lines; / Give me a kiss, I'll countercheck thy kiss" (2.2.36-37). Bel-Imperia punctuates her metaphor with the physical act of kissing, and she thereby reiterates the physical nature of the exchanging of "lines." The parallel syntax of these two lines of dialogue makes kissing and writing equivalent—"Give me a kiss" becomes a poetic reiteration of "Write loving lines." Such a written exchange also gives the actors playing these roles a mode of sexual expression that would work as public performance. Horatio's declaration of love in this scene also comments on the limitations the stage itself places on the expression of sexual passion and desire.

*The Spanish Tragedy*, like its successor *Hamlet*, simultaneously comments on the power of textual intercourse and reproduction and its inadequacies through the use of letters on stage. The illicit relationships that staged written exchanges confirm, like Hamlet's and Ophelia's, often serve as a prelude to revenge and tragic deaths. After Horatio's violent death, for example, the only birth that Bel-Imperia can have is a textual one. Lorenzo has tried to circumscribe the text of her body by imprisoning her, yet she manages to write an incriminating letter in her own blood, one that calls for the deaths of her brother and Balthazar. The red-inked missive reaches its putative "grandfather," Hieronimo, just as he is mourning his son's death and fantasizing about avenging him.
He refers to the letter as an "unexpected miracle" (3.2.32). It is a gift that seems to fall from heaven to ease his grief. The bloody letter becomes a miscarriage, a monstrous birth, one that leads to bloody revenge and the end of paternal continuity, rather than the happy continuation of the patriarchy. Bel-Imperia directs this written evidence of her relationship with Horatio at his father Hieronomo. She thus uses a textual birth to instigate revenge against her brother and Balthazar.

Interestingly, the letter only works after combining with male ink. The rules of letters follow the rules of physical reproduction: the woman provides the letter/writing medium, and the man provides the spirit/ink. The male ink comes in the form of Pedringano's posthumous letter that the hangman delivers to Hieronimo. The language of Pedringano's letter and Hieronimo's response to it contains many references to birth. Pedringano asks that Hieronimo "labor [his] delivery" (3.7.33) from prison, and notes that if Hieronimo fails to do so, the letter alone shall remain to "reveal the troth" of Horatio's murder. The writing, as Hieronimo "make[s] compare 'twixt hers and this," gives birth to Hieronimo's revenge plot, after being "closely smothered and so long concealed." (3.7.54, 47). With his line of paternity stolen from him, Hieronimo is left with a perverse textual child to help him avenge his son. The textual reproduction here, unlike the superior type Shakespeare advocates in the sonnets, proves to be a "monstrous birth," more along the lines of the revenge plot Iago "ingender[s]" against Othello (1.3.385-386).\(^7\) However, such paternity is the only type to which Hieronimo has access by the play's end. The drama simultaneously comments on the power of textual intercourse and reproduction and its inadequacies through the use of letters onstage.

---

particularly their multifarious effects on female characters. Male characters, too, are subject to the humoral influences of ink—as Othello, Hamlet and other characters show. The plays that succeed *The Spanish Tragedy* preserve the intimate connection between letters and characters, a connection that "ingenders" the action of the plays and genders their characters.

Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* takes the "verbal friction" of comedies like *Twelfth Night*, adding to it the high stakes, blood-laden letters and texts that dominate many tragedies. Although a comedy, *Volpone* resists a tidy comic ending and adds more complexity and seriousness to interactions between bodies and letters, particularly female bodies and male letters. Letters and other textual exchanges signify physical, sexual exchanges in *Volpone* as they do in *The Spanish Tragedy* and in later revenge tragedies like *Hamlet* and *Othello*. I discuss Jonson’s play in this chapter on tragedy because it engages the serious idea of a poet who indelibly inscribes the female body. Ever the moralist, Jonson also exposes the consequences of such an inscription. With his satiric rendering of so much courtly behavior, Jonson insists on bringing the audience to terms with the crass sexual and economic goals of much poetic intercourse. What begins as a comic farce ends sinisterly, with serious bodily consequences for all the players involved.

No wonder, then, that Jonson spends over one hundred lines in his opening epistle differentiating himself from the lecherous poets whose "abortive features" traffic in "ribaldry, profanation, blasphemy, [and] all license of offense to God and man"

---

9 Katharine Eisaman Maus, in her introduction to *Volpone* from the edition cited above, notes that "the lack of deaths in *Volpone* satisfies the criterion of comedy," but "a swift demise would be a happier fate" than the Celia’s chaste limbo or Mosca and Volpone’s time in the galleys and prison, respectively.
(Prefatory Epistle, 36-7.40). For example, when Celia's husband suspects her of infidelity, because of the exchange of a token and a note between Celia and Volpone during his mountebank street performance, Corvino's threats are violently physical. He threatens to "make [Celia] an anatomy, / Dissect [her his] own self," also to "read a lecture / Upon [her] to the city, and in public" (2.6.70-72). Corvino's threat amounts to a textual display of Celia's sexual indiscretions for others to read, certainly the type of "profanation" or "ribaldry" that Jonson warns against. This literary merger of physical violence, anatomy, and writing emphasizes the physicality of writing itself, and the close link between written indiscretions and physical ones.

As in the comedies, inked letters, poems, and printed texts conduct the passions of their writers and readers and thereby infiltrate and influence their humoral bodies. Women characters like Celia, as I also demonstrate in the third chapter, exhibit a particular vulnerability to textual violation, in part because they are so vulnerable to sexual violation. The transmission of written material in the plays underscores the difficulty of keeping the female body hermetic, and gives passage to a range of passions (and passionate imbalances)—lust, choler, melancholy, even madness. The sexual power of verbal and written exchange prefigures Celia's violation despite her and her husband's best efforts. Cuckoldry becomes inevitable, and the promiscuity of letters proves its inevitability, in much the same way that Jaques's horns do in *As You Like It*. Like Shakespeare's sonneteer or the lovesick Biron of *Love's Labour's Lost*, Volpone uses the elusive and effective tools of words and letters to defile Celia before she ever sets foot in his home. The difference between Volpone's use of letters and Biron's, however, lies in the consequences for the women who receive them. Rosaline may be
blackened, but she retains her virtue and attraction for Biron. In contrast, Volpone’s written salvos indelibly stain Celia. As letters and poems make their way from comedies to tragedies, the consequences of their receipt become far more serious, even deadly. In the context of tragedies, the violations of the body that texts commit are not means to a socially sanctioned ending, but deadly, irreversible ruinations.

The textual violations that inform Volpone resonate with those that arise in many tragedies. These dramas comment on the power of textual intercourse to penetrate bodies. Though not all texts are poisonous, all texts are penetrative and, like the "leprous distilment" poured into Old Hamlet's ear, can act upon the body in devastating ways. In her discussion of theatrical audition and Hamlet, Allison Deutermann recognizes that the sound of a play can physically affect the play's audience. She observes that, "sounds, including certain kinds of speech, could thus be absorbed through the ear involuntarily and at great risk to the listener." I agree with Deutermann's observation here; however, I would add that before the lines of any play could become "thunderous speeches that subject listeners to dangerous somatic processes, opening up their bodies to the indiscriminate reception of theatrical language," they first had to be written by a playwright and read by an actor. Hamlet does in fact direct the speech and sound of the players prior to their performance of the Murder of Gonzago, but he also makes a point of giving the players a "speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which [he] would set down and insert" into the script for their

---

11 Ibid., 232.
performance (2.2.518-519). The published word, whether spoken, read, or written, becomes part of the physiological economy of author and audience.

It is worth noting that Volpone's brief epilogue reminds the audience that the "seasoning of a play is the applause" (5.12.152). The word "seasoning" promotes the idea of a playtext as an ingestible product—words from a script, presented by actors, for an audience to consume. The play self-consciously emphasizes the way people internalize language and the power words have to alter their receivers fundamentally (and physically).

In *Volpone*, the story of Celia's ruin demonstrates the importance of the written word in the construction (and destruction) of female virtue. From his first encounter with Celia, in his disguise as Scoto of Mantua, Volpone invokes the metaphor of letters to serve his ends. Pen and ink reproduction, of the type Shakespeare promotes in the sonnets, becomes perverted into pen and ink destruction, of the type that afflicts Ophelia. Early in the scene beneath Celia's window, Nano calls Hippocrates and Galen, "murderers of so much paper" (2.2.124). Nano's invocation of medical writing in this scene emphasizes the humoral baggage that letters carry from writers to readers, and from actors to audiences. Volpone responds to Nano's dismissal of Hippocrates and Galen with a monologue of "qualifications" to sell fake medicine, a screed that proves more aphrodisiacal than medicinal.

Volpone understands the way texts can violate women, and expresses pride in that understanding. He asserts that "whilst others have been at the balloo l/ have been at my book, and am now past the craggy paths of/ study and come to flow'ry plains of honor and reputation" (2.2.167-169). The double-entendre in these lines indicates that
Volpone's intent is to use the persuasive powers of book and letters to deflower the plains of honor and reputation, to sully the honest wife at the window above and cuckold her husband. As soon as Celia approaches the window and takes in Volpone's words, her honesty is doomed. When she drops her handkerchief to Volpone, he responds, fittingly, with the language of writing:

Here is a powder concealed/in this paper of which, if I should speak the worth, nine/ thousand volumes were but as one page, that page as a line/ that line as a word…” (2.2.226-229)

What the paper really conceals, of course, is the physical expression of Volpone's desire for Celia. An oblique reference to Sir Politic Would-Be's cuckoldry—that all of his "advices" and "letters" have been "intercepted" (2.3.13-14)—confirms the violation. This fact, along with the reading behavior of Lady Would-Be, noted later in the play, "Which o' your poets? Petrarch? Or Tasso? Or Dante? / Guarini? Ariosto? Aretine? / Cieco di Hadria? I have read them all" (3.4.79-81, emphasis mine), confirms the presence of sexual indiscretions in their marriage. The promiscuous ingestion of a variety of texts indicates unfaithfulness in their marriage and a general bawdiness in Lady Would-Be's character. Textual exchanges anatomize the humoral and sexual qualities of the characters involved, and give them the type of public airing with which Corvino threatens his young wife.

Corvino's cruel reprimands to Celia for her interest in the "medicine show" also contain many references to textual/sexual infidelity, and his threats of violent action against her demonstrate that he would murder more than "so much paper" to ensure Celia's chastity. He accuses her first of "entertaining a parley / With a known knave,"
and then suspects that he will "return [her handkerchief] with a letter" (2.5.39-42). He equates Celia's sending of a letter to that "knave" with her cuckolding him. Corvino's threatened punishment for Celia, which I described above, also figures her sexual transgressions as written transgressions, deepening the connection between texts and bodies that pervades this play. Furthermore, once Corvino takes part in exchanging Celia's honesty to Volpone for monetary gain, he again invokes the idea of inscribing her body publicly with the word "whore," and putting her on display as a defiled text should she resist his command to sleep with Volpone. Volpone's skillful manipulation of the power of the blank text, in the form of his unsigned will, translates into skillful (if ultimately unsuccessful) manipulation of the female body.

The treatment of Celia echoes the trials of two of Shakespeare's ruined women which I discuss in Chapter 3, Ophelia and Lucrece. Volpone casts himself in the role of the Petrarchan suitor, tempting his mistress with a verbal and literary potion replete with humoral tonics. The body in Jonson's play becomes a perverse letter, a paper on which only cruel stories can be written. Volpone's attempted seduction of Celia moves smoothly from a song of love to a list of "sensual baits" including rich jewels and meals of delicacies such as "the heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales, / The brains of peacocks and of ostriches" (3.7.190-204). Here, the beloved is not a delicate bird for the suitor to capture, but a piece of meat to be devoured. The white doe becomes venison. Volpone's text anatomizes the symbols of poetic love—jewels, birds, and flowers.12 Like the sonneteers I discuss in my second chapter, and like Shakespeare's Tarquin,

---

12 Carroll's essay makes particular note of the use of both jewels and flowers, particularly roses as representations of female anatomy and virginity, on p.22-23 of the above-cited article. The importance of both these items in correspondence and romantic exchange reinforces the link between the written word and the body, a connection that Carroll does not make.
Volpone adds a certain amount of blood and guts to the alabaster mistress. He thereby performs the simultaneous feats of elevating his mistress's virtue and indelibly staining it all at once, in the same manner of those sonneteers.

Volpone concocts a verbal love potion, one that strikes the same floral notes as the two Rosalinds of *As You Like It* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Twelfth Night*'s Viola. The flowers in Volpone's words, like the letters and other texts in these plays, collapse the tools of seduction and the actual seduction. Mixtures of plants and water act upon the body much like that similar concoction that fills the poet's inkwell. Similar to Lucrece's black and red streams of blood, floral potions symbolize ruination and innocence at the same time. During his bedroom encounter with Celia, Volpone revisits his medicine show persona and offers her a bath in "...the juice of July flowers, / Spirit of roses, and of violets," (3.7.212-213), all of which is meant to move Celia to give in to his sexual advances. Extracts of roses and violets appear as ingredients in a humoral assault on female virtue, even as they elevate the idea of such virtue. These botanical solutions act like the ink in a Petrarchan sonnet—ruining the women whose innocence they extol. Corvino's fierce protection of Celia's virtue, followed by his willingness to sell that virtue to someone else when it benefits him, adds a dark edge to this comedy when it comes to the idea of female chastity.

The listing of flowers and the singing of songs contain a darker theme reminiscent of Shakespeare's descriptions of Ophelia's flowery suicide and ruination. Laertes laments her obvious decline calling her "rose of May" (4.5.156). During one of her mad songs, Ophelia offers to give her brother "violets" had they not "withered all when her father died" (*Hamlet* 4.5180-181). These symbols of faithfulness, violets,
degenerate into a mark of ruin, yet they symbolize a stubborn innocence within her character that transcends judgment. Laertes recognizes their symbolism when he hopes at her burial that "from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring" (5.1.223-224), in order to redeem her "doubtful" death (5.1.209). Ophelia's "fantastic garlands" devolve into a deadly bath, a liquid text of her misery for others to read and interpret (4.7.139), yet they also, like Lucrece's bi-colored blood, protest her lack of fault in her ruin. Celia, too, though never caught in the act of sexual transgression, lives out her life as a ruined woman, cast out of her husband's home because of male textual transgressions.

The botanical theme of Volpone's attempt at seduction emphasizes the connection between sexuality and textuality, as well as that between comedy and tragedy. Celia's impassioned plea for the preservation of her chastity reiterates the penetrations that texts can visit upon the body. She hopes aloud that if Volpone has "ears that will be pierced, or eyes / That can be opened, a heart may be touched," then her words will save her (3.7.239-240). Failing that, she, like Lucrece, offers to turn penetrative words upon herself, and represents her own destroyed body as a text of desperation. She begs Volpone to "flay [her] face / Or poison it with ointments for seducing / [his] blood to this rebellion. Rub these hands / With what may cause an eating leprosy / E'en to my bones and marrow…" (3.7.251-255). Celia chooses two particular punishments, flaying and leprosy, which would disfigure her outer body and anatomize her for public view. She asks to make a text of her body to enable the expression that her husband and the larger society restrain from her. Celia imagines gruesome physical manifestations of her ruin like the parti-colored rivers of blood that stream from Lucrece's body to broadcast her shame.
Unlike Lucrece, of course, Celia has an accidental champion, Bonario, to save her from Volpone's advances. Though she is spared becoming a physical text of tragedy, and granted a separation from her scheming husband, she is, in the end, sent home to her father, and a lifetime of chaste shame—not exactly a nunnery, but close enough. In a comic reversal, Corvino must bear the textual shame of his sexual misdeeds in public, "...rowed / Round about Venice, through the Grand Canal, / Wearing a cap with fair long ass's ears / Instead of horns, and so to mount, a paper / Pinned on [his] breast, to the berlino" (5.12.135-139). Thus Volpone ends with a textual punishment for sexual transgressions, demonstrating the dire consequences that seductive words can have for both women and men. As the cases of Celia and Ophelia go to show, once a young woman accepts a man's letters, or exchanges words with a man, she is no longer chaste, and problems inevitably arise. These textual exchanges are not consequence-free for male characters either, of course—Corvino pays for his sexual misdeeds with textual shame. Moreover, just because men can express themselves more freely on paper, does not mean they will do so to their own advantage, or to anyone else's. Often as not, like Iago or Volpone, men use pen and ink to trouble the sexual relationships of the people around them. This is certainly the case for Hamlet, whose writings do little to purge his melancholy, and much to spread that melancholy to his friends, family, and country.
Part II: On Hamlet's Inky Cloak

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief

That can denote me truly.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (1.2.77-83)

*Hamlet* is in many ways a play about the power of storytelling to corrupt or infect both the human body and the body of the state. The first words of the play include a command from Francisco to Bernardo that Bernardo "unfold" himself to be read as friend or foe (1.1.2). The ghost of Old Hamlet insists that Hamlet "lend [his] serious hearing to what [Old Hamlet] shall unfold" to him (1.5.6). Hamlet describes his mourning clothes as an "inky cloak" that "denote[s]" his sorrow, however inadequately (1.2.76, 83). The characters in these early scenes figure themselves as pieces of paper presenting information to be read and digested, often on pain of death. In the quotation I have used as a headnote for this chapter, Hamlet directly connects the body's responses to sorrow—facial expressions, breath, tears—to ink and writing. His body "denotes" or transcribes his humoral imbalance. However, that denotation is not necessarily true or accurate; just as the body can take the form of a text to be read by others, so other texts can emend or damage it.
Hamlet unfolds himself to be inscribed with madness and revenge at the urging of a story, a text. Old Hamlet's tale demonstrates the potency of words over the physical body. The story of the king's gruesome death by poison poured in the ear which "...courses through/ The natural gates and alleys of the body,/ And with a sudden vigour it doth posset/ And curd, like eager droppings into milk,/ The thin and wholesome blood..." (1.5.66-70), provides a perfect analogy for the harsh physical and mental effects Old Hamlet's tale has on Hamlet. The ghost begins his story with an acknowledgement of the physical power of such a text to "harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood" (1.5.16). Hamlet invokes metaphors of reading and writing to describe the physical effects of the ghost's narration:

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmixed with baser matter. (1.5.98-104)

Hamlet resolves to clear other texts from his mind—literally, physically erasing the "pressures" and inscriptions of his prior experience. The one text that remains will stay "unmixed." The notion of a single fluid preserving the story and its attendant melancholic emotions invites humoral interpretation and diagnosis, and in this dramatic moment, material culture meets humor theory in a way that opens the play to new interpretations. According to Galen, the "faculties of the soul depend upon the mixtures
of the body," and "the best constitution of the body is that in which all the homogeneous parts...retain their proper mixture." In this case, the choler and rage toward his uncle that his father's ghost incites in Hamlet seems to override for the moment his persistent melancholy. He swings from one humoral extreme to another, defying any kind of "proper mixture," and indulging his imbalance at the expense of his country and everyone around him. Hamlet, upon internalizing the ghost's tale, decides to remain consciously "unmixed," and therefore sick in soul and body, in order to carry out his revenge.

If an unbalanced Young Man could not purge his illness through diet, physical exercise, or purgation, he could do so through the "fifth humour," ink. The expenditure of ink onto paper serves much the same purpose as a bloodletting, emetics, or laxatives. In this play, the book of Hamlet's brain becomes the repository for melancholic fluid. The ink here behaves much like black bile, an overabundance of which causes melancholy. Hamlet must purge this fluid and give rein instead to the choler that urges him on to revenge. That bile flows forth in his language and his actions, as he calls for his "tables" to "set it down/ That one may smile and smile and be a villain" (1.5.106-109). Hamlet, perhaps already a bit tilted toward melancholy from the earlier expense of spirit in his love letters to Ophelia, gives into this humoral imbalance completely. That imbalance begins textually, outside the body, enters as a poison, and exits in the form of a black and melancholy idea preserved on paper. The process of writing can be construed as both purgative and damaging at the same time.

Hamlet's melancholy arises not from the unjust murder, but from hearing the story of the murder and writing it down. When Hamlet, suffering from melancholy even
before encountering his father’s ghost, wishes that his "...too too solid flesh would melt,/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew," he implies a type of distillation. The idea of distilling himself into a liquid that might carry away his pain echoes Bright's ideas about the proper diet and purgation for melancholics—that their meats should be of a nature to "ingender to pure and thinne iuyce,…and generallie they should be liquide, and in forme of brothes...".\(^{13}\) Bright, along with Galen, also discusses purgation and electuary fluids as a mode of treatment. Ink, too, serves as such an electuary serum, but like the other purgative treatments, its results can be uncertain at best, and perhaps engender more harm to the patient if misapplied. Hamlet's humoral condition is "unmixed" even before his encounter with the ghost. However, it is the first meeting with Old Hamlet that engenders the fatal mixture of story and body. Cycles of poisonous textual exchange drive the action of the play—Hamlet violates Ophelia with love poetry and letters; he kills his mother not with poison alone, but with poison accompanied by a dramatic text that he authorizes, and at least in part authors. The infectious power of the text gives the tragedy momentum.

For Hamlet, the materialistic imprint of this one text, the poisonous story of his father's murder, creates a humoral imbalance that plagues him and taints the text of the play until his death. For Ophelia, Hamlet's letters and love poetry, combined with the questionable advice poured in her ear by both her father and brother, affect her in the same way. The ingestion of harmful texts is as fatal for her as for Hamlet. Laertes warns Ophelia of this potential harm even as he fills her ears with impurities:

If with too credent ear you list his songs,

\(^{13}\) Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, 258.
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity.

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,…

The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth

Contagious blastments are most imminent. (1.3.30-33, 39-42)

The language of deflowering, disease, and contagion that Laertes uses here to warn Ophelia actually begins the poisoning that will continue as the situation at court deteriorates. Laertes himself has violated her by enumerating all the potential consequences of her violation by another man. Ophelia confirms that she has internalized all of this, and thus seals her doom before any indiscretion can happen: "I shall th' effect of this good lesson keep / As watchman to my heart" (1.3.45-46). She assures her brother that his advice is "in [her] memory locked," and only he "shall keep the key of it" (1.3.85-86).

Nearly immediately after this preliminary violation occurs, Ophelia receives more of the same from her father. He accuses her of being too "free and bounteous" in her "audience" with Hamlet (1.3.93), and warns her that taking "[Hamlet’s] tenders for true pay" will result in her "tendering [Polonius] a fool" (1.3.106, 109). Polonius draws a direct connection between accepting Hamlet’s words and having his child. He proudly says as much to Claudius, noting that she "took the fruits of his advice" to "Admit no messengers, receive no tokens" from Hamlet (2.2.144-145). With a characteristic lack of awareness, Polonius verbally sullies his daughter first, before anyone else can do so.
Ophelia's own family sows the seeds of her death textually, in a play about infectious stories and personal destruction.

When Polonius seeks assurances of Ophelia's chastity despite Hamlet's overtures toward her, Ophelia defends her honor, insisting that she "did repel his letters and denied / His access to [her] (2.1.111-112). Ophelia equates the repulsion of a man's writing with the rejection of that man's body. Polonius also construes Hamlet's written advances as sexual advances. When he voices his concerns about Hamlet's and Ophelia's relationship to Queen Gertrude, he reads Hamlet's love poetry aloud to underscore the potential seriousness of their flirtation. Ironically, by orally publishing Hamlet's odes on Ophelia's beauty, Polonius himself sets in motion the very violation he tries to prevent. Polonius advertises his daughter's virtue even as he makes public the words designed to compromise it. He subjects Ophelia's chastity to public scrutiny then reiterates Hamlet's suit in his own voice. A sexually charged transfer of texts occurs here that exemplifies an affective relationship between text and body typical of the early modern period. The interpenetrative nature of words and bodies creates a situation in which the publication of a woman's chastity is a risky enterprise, almost always resulting in her destruction.

Both Hamlet's and Ophelia's textual/physical problems illustrate the dangerous, problematic relationship between texts and the early modern body. Contemporary medical writers, such as Jacques Ferrand, included music, literature, and drama in the catalogue of suspicious influences on one's health. Among these, the promiscuous reading of love poetry figured prominently. In Act 2, as Polonius, Claudius, and Gertrude discuss Hamlet's "lovesickness" for Ophelia, Gertrude remarks as he enters that "the
poor wretch comes reading” (2.2.169). The book is more than a prop, but an outward manifestation of Hamlet's illness. Not coincidentally, Hamlet's brief and cryptic dialogue with Polonius includes imagery of death, birth, decay, and words:

HAMLET For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a
Good, kissing carrion—have you a daughter?

POLONIUS I have, my lord.

HAMLET Let her not walk i'th'sun. Conception is a blessing,
but not as your daughter may conceive. Friend, look to't.

POLONIUS [aside] How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter.
Yet he knew me not at first—a said I was a fishmonger. A is far gone, and
truly, in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this. I'll speak
to him again.—What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET Words, words, words. (2.2.182-192)

Polonius has, prior to this conversation, already engaged his daughter's audience, and he has published evidence of her virtue and desirability to the king and queen. The play establishes Ophelia's violation and contamination using the symbolism of a book and an ironically intimate conversation between two men, her lover and her father. The play illustrates through this textual exchange how a woman like Ophelia becomes an object of social and sexual exchange among men.

In *Of Lovesicknesse*, Ferrand advises that to avoid contracting erotic melancholy—a physical, humoral imbalance—young people should refrain from "extremely dangerous" activities such as "reading dirty books, listening to music, playing viols, lutes, and other instruments, and even more, going to plays and farces, balls and
dances, for such exercises open up the pores of the heart no less than those of the skin." In other words, taking in the art of an author, playwright, or musician results in physical, not just mental, contamination. Ferrand places "familiarity and frequent conversation" in the same category as infectious food or drink because "carnal love makes its attack upon the brain...by the windows of the eyes." The conversation between a poet and his audience or mistress invades both the eyes and ears and becomes a physical interaction.

The textual cycle of Hamlet's humoral crisis suggests a fundamental link between mental and physical health and reading and writing. Ink serves as more than a metaphor for any particular humor; it functions as an external manifestation of those humors. Pen and paper work as extensions of the body, and can serve at turns as a mechanism of balance or imbalance. Ferrand warns that "With the sense of hearing must be associated the reading of lewd and immoral books...[and] Just as dangerous are the letters and love notes crammed with enticing words..." As a remedy against love potions, Ferrand recommends "prayer, the reading of good books, and other serious activities." Perhaps these "serious activities" included some sort of writing to purge the ill humor, but one can imagine that Hamlet's odes to Ophelia's "excellent white bosom" (2.2.112) or his concentrated ravings about carrion and conception, were probably not what Ferrand had in mind. Ferrand would have likely agreed that the written word and the body, for better or worse, interacted intimately with one another. Bearing that in mind, the exchange of letters and poetry between two lovers takes on a

---

14 Ferrand, A Treatise on Lovesickness, 324.
15 Ibid., 243.
16 Ibid., 346
variety of physical implications. The written text becomes more than a symbol of devotion or evidence of impurity—it becomes a symptom. No wonder, then, that Polonius is so eager for Ophelia to return all of Hamlet's letters.

The sexual-textual economy in *Hamlet* shapes the audience's perception of Ophelia throughout the play, emphasizing a crucial fact about textual and sexual interactions between men and women in early modern drama and poetry—text and sex constitute similar forms of bodily violation. At the end of the soliloquy, Hamlet imagines his words finding their way into Ophelia's body, exclaiming, "The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remembered" (3.1.91-92). She will verbalize his sins, which she has internalized, to God, thus becoming the physical vehicle of his redemption. In Hamlet and Ophelia's conversation in the same scene, the textual violation that Hamlet imagines becomes more concrete. Ophelia attempts to return "remembrances" that Hamlet has given her, including, significantly, "words of so sweet breath composed," scented letters and poetry that have now "their perfume lost" (3.1.95, 100-101). Of course, Ophelia cannot regain her virtue by returning these tokens. As with Olivia's Lucrece seal, once the letter is opened, it cannot be resealed. Hamlet, recognizing the irreversibility of his textual intercourse with Ophelia calls madly for her to get to a nunnery, implying that she is unchaste and ruined. She has "sucked the honey of his music vows," and internalized his poetic overtures (3.1.155). Ophelia's efforts to repel the texts of men fail, ultimately leading to her demise.

For Hamlet, the acts of writing love poetry, sending a letter, and creating a dramatic production become modes of purging his ill humors. Such purgations are not an effective healing exercise for Hamlet; rather, they alter the nature of his imbalance to
help him avenge his father. But healing or not, the power of textual creation and dissemination influences his humoral body. He acknowledges as much when he engages the players for *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet remembers the First Player's speech as being "caviare to the general," "well-digested," and having "no sallrets in the lines to make the matter savoury" (2.2.418, 421, 422-423).

Here he acknowledges with plentiful food-related metaphors, the physical relationship between play text and audience. "Sallets" which can mean "spices" or "salads," were routinely prescribed by physicians as a way of rebalancing humors, while especially savoury, or salty, dishes were warned against. Galen, Ferrand, and Bright all discuss such dietary remedies. Once again, a text presents itself as something to be internalized, digested—something that could have as profound an effect on the body as food (or poison). These three authors also recommend purging, either through vomiting, laxatives, or bloodletting to rebalance the humors.

Such purgation might, in a properly balanced humoral body, result in a rebalancing, but Hamlet merely intends to pass along the toxic text he has received from his father. As Hamlet says in reply to Guildenstern's concern about the king's "choler" following the play, "for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into far more choler" (3.2.280-81). Claudius demonstrates the way writing can pass along toxic humoral excesses when he turns to letter-writing to vent his own choler and to kill Hamlet. After putting Hamlet aboard the ship to England after Polonius's death, Claudius verbalizes a directive that encapsulates the bodily power of the text, the power of life and death as he instructs the court that will receive Hamlet:

---

17 Deutermann, "'Caviare to the general'?", 237. Deutermann also uses this quotation, from which the title of her essay comes, to show the gustatory nature of listening. Her analysis does not address reading as part of this internalization, however, or writing as a way of influencing a reader's "taste."
Our sovereign process, which imports at full,
By letters conjuring to that effect,
The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England,
For like the hectic in my blood he rages,
And thou must cure me. (4.3.64-68)

While only Hamlet's death can offer the true "cure" for Claudius's problem, he tries to commit this murder via the medium of a letter. He has poured poison in his sleeping brother's ear, and seeks to do the same to his son with writing.

Of course, Hamlet escapes this fate, and sends poisonous letters in two directions, two to Denmark, and one to England. Hamlet sends evidence of his life, in his "character," or handwriting, to both his uncle and his mother. The letters to Denmark work to keep the poison of Old Hamlet's story in Denmark, and in the final scenes, those letters lead to the ingestion of poison by all the members of the court, including Hamlet. But the letter that leads to the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is perhaps the most particular evidence of a text that carries the important elements of the body.

Hamlet, upon discovering Claudius's order for his execution, "Ere [he] could make a prologue to his brains, / They had begun the play—[he] sat [him] down, / Devised a new commission, wrote it fair" (5.2.31-33). Hamlet seals this with his father's signet, which he happens to have in his purse. Here the text stands in for the body as a means of genetic transmission. Hamlet retakes his proper place in the bloodline through the medium of ink. He even refers to this new letter as a "changeling," a child (albeit an uncanny one), further emphasizing the physical connection between text and body. With Old Hamlet's story revised, his brother punished, and his bloodline ended, the toxic
chain is complete. It is left to Horatio to tell Hamlet's story, and dramatize its bloody consequences by placing the bodies on a stage. Fortinbras agrees to this final textual presentation of stories, bodies, and blood—leaving the audience to carry that image away from the theatre.

Early modern authors often represented people as books to be read or misread, and women as sealed letters, unstamped wax, or blank pages to be sullied by the male apparatuses of pen, ink, and stamp. Shakespeare innovates by collapsing the metaphoric distinction between the body and the text. The indivisibility of the word and the body helps drive the plots of his plays, and it thematically unites his poetry. Just as human sexuality was construed according to a hierarchical one-sex model in this period, Shakespeare's words, whether dramatic, poetic, spoken or written, affect the body according to a "one-text" model, one in which "the metaphorical and the corporeal are so bound up with one another that the difference between the two is really one of emphasis rather than kind." The physical fates of Shakespeare's characters are similarly "bound up" with the various texts that they create and receive.

Part III: Writing Anatomy: Poisonous Texts and the Humoral Body

Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh
To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident.
What is't distracts you? This is flesh and blood, sir;
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster

---

18 I found useful discussions of this trope in both de Grazia, "Imprints: Shakespeare, Gutenberg, and Descartes," and Thompson and Thompson, "Meaning, 'Seeing', Printing," both in Brooks, Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England.

19 Laqueur, Making Sex,109.
Kneels at my husband's tomb.

—John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1.1.452-456) 20

The tragedies comment on the power of textual intercourse to penetrate bodies and affect the way people's lives unfold. Written texts serve similar functions in comedies, only more as vehicles of sexual exchange than as poisons. In the previous chapter, I discuss the way many characters use the biological qualities of written texts to interrogate the Petrarchan model of idealized femininity. Letters, books, and dramatic texts within the plays function self-consciously to draw attention to the physical bodies of the characters, both male and female. Some characters like Hamlet, Othello, or Volpone, find themselves buffeted at turns by desire, rage, or melancholy depending upon the texts they create and receive. In tragic plays, the effects of these texts are often fatal for them as well as the female objects of their desire. Villainous, manipulative characters like Iago are largely able to create the chaos they do because they have learned to wield the effects of textuality over other people. That "handkerchief / Spotted with strawberries," is not just a token of affection or a prop, but a text to be read and misread based on Iago's machinations (3.3.439-440). The consequences of such misreadings are physical ones—torture and death.

Virtuous female characters like Lucrece, Ophelia and Celia who find themselves the objects of Petrarchan affection generally suffer terrible physical and emotional effects from the written salvos of their suitors. Such virtuous women can be subject to textual taint under the right circumstances, and are in fact more vulnerable because of their virtuousness. In *Othello*, for example, when he confronts Desdemona about the

infidelity he suspects, asks, "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book / Made to write 'whore' upon?" (4.2.73-74). He likens her stained virtue to an ink-stained page. All the same, he also describes her skin as being "smooth as monumental alabaster" right before he kills her (5.2.5). Of course Othello, too, has been manipulated through a series of textual misunderstandings, and the penalty for his misunderstanding is also death. In the tragedies the consequences of textual transgressions are extremely violent—poisoning their recipients or leading to bloody mutilations that, to borrow a word from Volpone's Celia, "flay" them, anatomizing their faults to the audience. What the deaths of Desdemona and Othello show is both the power of the Petrarchan ideal to engender affection between people and the ease with which that ideal can become fatally compromised. That being the case, even more woe falls upon those women who yield intemperately to the biological urges that such poetic assaults are designed to inflame.

Female characters court danger by defying textual norms and admitting that they are not "figure[s] cut in alabaster" but fleshly beings. This is certainly the case for the Duchess of Malfi, and for Shakespeare's Juliet. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet may initially bask in Romeo's Petrarchan gaze from her balcony, but the physical consummation of that love leads to her entombment in the family monument, first temporarily then forever. Ironically, her acceptance of Romeo's advances leads to her becoming a passionless monument. Romeo and Juliet's relationship begins with courtly poetic admiration, as Romeo compares Juliet to a "rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear" (1.5.47), and her body to a "holy shrine" (1.5.95). However, the play moves quickly to physicality as the lovers kiss. Not coincidentally, Juliet says that Romeo kisses "by th'
book" (1.5.108). While Juliet may simply mean that he kisses well, as the gloss in The Norton Shakespeare indicates, this particular compliment also invokes the idea of physical contact as literary contact.  

She directly associates the touch of her soon-to-be lover's lips with the printed page of a book and all the Petrarchan flatteries that may reside therein.

Romeo indeed pursues Juliet, in the beginning, with the tools of literary convention, but Mercutio, in a satiric mode reminiscent of Sidney, quickly adds bawdy sexuality to Romeo's poetic advances. As he and Benvolio search for Romeo after the Capulet's party, Mercutio calls for him, shouting, "Romeo! Humours! Madman! Passion! Lover!" (2.1.8). Mercutio's lines call attention to the imbalance of Romeo's passions. Mercutio takes Romeo to task for idealizing "Rosaline's bright eyes / ...her high forehead and her scarlet lip, / ...her fine foot, straight leg" in Petrarchan fashion, and then renders his blazon obscene by adding her "...quivering thigh, / And the demesnes that there adjacent lie" (2.1.19-20). Mercutio highlights the facts that the objective of such poetic language, no matter how prettily written, is ultimately crass sexual conquest, and that such relationships can have dire physical consequences. No wonder he describes Romeo as "...already dead—stabbed with / a white wench's black eye, run through the ear with a love / song, the very pin of his heart cleft..." (2.3.12-14), when he finds out that Tybalt has sent a letter of challenge to the Montague house. This letter initiates the bloodshed before the actual duel ever begins. It also reinforces the unknown consanguinity of Tybalt and his secret in-law. Mercutio reminds the audience

---

21 Frederick Kiefer, in Writing on the Renaissance Stage, notes that a Renaissance audience accustomed to the "symbolic application in the written word" would notice that playwrights "endow actual books, letters, and documents with an extra dimension," 107. I contend that that "extra dimension" is physical, and most often humoral/sexual in nature.
of the physicality of letters and poetry, and of their ability to make "worm's meat" of even the most adept wits and lovers (3.1.102). The violence that erupts between the two families, even as the lovers consummate their secret marriage, marks the descent from Petrarchan love to physical expression. The action of the play returns cyclically to Petrarchanism as the fathers of the warring clans agree to erect statues of each other's children "in pure gold" as a monument to the "glooming peace" established by their deaths (5.3.299, 305). Unlike their physical analogues, the idealized lovers live on, as insensible as a laurel tree and as dead as a statue. The deadly writings that inform the plot of tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet* set the stage for an even more literal depiction of toxic texts in later plays.

While Shakespeare and Jonson continued the project of using inked texts to embody their Petrarchan mistresses and to illustrate concretely their characters' sexual and humoral states, some later playwrights, like John Webster, Thomas Middleton, and John Ford, took the anatomization of texts even more literally. The characters of these plays, "lively bodied" on the stage and "[taking] life" from the "clear pens" of their authors, bring inscribed bodies, hearts, blood, and guts, to the edge of the stage for the audience's eager consumption.22

John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* carries Petrarchan admiration to its most extreme conclusion, by presenting the supposed Platonic ideal as a sinful attraction between a brother and sister. Like the courtiers in *Love's Labour's Lost*, and like Romeo, Ford's Giovanni finds himself so absorbed in books and in his own confusing emotions that he can see no ideal beyond his forbidden sister Annabella. Petrarchan

---

22 The two quotations here come from the "Commendatory Verses" at the beginning of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* from William Rowley and John Ford, respectively, as reproduced in the Norton Anthology cited above.
admiration in this play becomes perverted into incest, onanism, and self-destruction. The media of books, poetry and letters provide the means to hasten the destructive ends of the doomed relationship. Their father, Florio, frets that Giovanni is "so devoted to his book" that Florio "doubt[s] [Giovanni's] health," and rightly so. This devotion has infected him with an admiration that he expends upon his sister in the prior scene. He tells Annabella that "...The poets feign, [he] read[s], / That Juno for her forehead did exceed / All other goddesses: but [he] durst swear / [Her] forehead exceeds hers..." (1.2.192-195). He also compares her eyes to "Promethean fire" before offering her his dagger and enjoining her to "Rip up [his] bosom" to "behold / A heart in which is writ the truth [he] speaks[s]" (1.2.198, 210-211). All of Giovanni's reading has infected him and altered his physical state. Like Romeo, Giovanni has become an afflicted lover from an overdose of bookish studies of love, and the resulting passion leads him tragically astray.

John Webster's Duchess of Malfi also interrogates Petrarchanism and the effects of textual exchange upon bodies. The play links feminine textual proficiency to sexual impurity and death to an even greater degree than Romeo and Juliet does. The Duchess, like the villain Bosola, exhibits a prodigious command of rhetorical forms—concurrent with a prodigious command of her own sexuality. This is not a coincidence. When she decides to marry Antonio, a man beneath her station, in defiance of her brothers, the first thing she asks of him is to "Take pen and ink, and write" (1.1.364). She dictates text to him—not only is this indicative of their imminent sexual intimacy, it is a fatal reversal in the social and sexual order of the society in which the play happens. Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, provides a fine example of this phenomenon.
She betrays her own promiscuity not only by her actions and words with the Cardinal, but through her mastery of rhetoric. A Renaissance audience would have immediately construed Julia as a whore and her husband as a cuckold, the moment the aptly named Castruchio acknowledges her powers of verbal persuasion. To persuade her husband not to go to war, she "broke of a captain she met, full of wounds" (1.1. 109-110). She comments on the soldier's open wounds, and jokes about him "[lying] like the children of Ishmael, all in tents" (1.1.111). Castruchio and Ferdinand go on to joke about her ability to talk gallants with drawn swords into putting them up. A woman who reads and/or talks too much is a woman given to bodily promiscuity as well. The physically invasive analogy of the soldier with all his gaping wounds gives Julia an uncanny masculine edge. She feminizes even a soldier—and is jokingly presented as able to use her wit to get warlike gallants to "put up their swords." Julia's verbal prolixity is more threatening to the patriarchal order than mere promiscuity. Her particular textual skill gives her powers of emasculation, the ability to use words to feminize a male body.

As a woman caught between husband and Cardinal, Julia lives in limbo—outside the patriarchal social order. Her moments in the play serve not only to give a contrast to the Duchess's physical virtue (not that it does the Duchess any good at all in the end), but to emphasize the susceptibility of the body to texts, books, and dramas. Fittingly, her demise comes from physical contact with a book—a book held by the Cardinal, master of the toxic text. Julia goes to see the Cardinal intent on "[winding her] tongue about his heart / like a skein of silk" in order to get information for Bosola (5.2.234-35). But the Cardinal is quite aware of both her rhetorical prowess and the power of words to damage the body. He warns her that the secret of the Duchess's murder may "like a
ling'ring poison… / Spread in [her] veins and kill [her] seven year hence” (5.5.279-280). Julia agrees to keep the secret anyway, and then seals the agreement by kissing a devotional book that the Cardinal offers her. The book is poisoned, and the act of touching her lips to it results in her death.

The *Duchess of Malfi*, too, presents the impossibility of dispensing with natural biological imperatives for the sake of art, and it does so using rhetoric and writing as devices to unite the body and the mind in a way that defies neo-Platonic order. This play demonstrates the social consequences of denying women's physicality for the sake of (highly questionable) male ideals of virtue. The Duchess's brothers, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, and the Cardinal, resist the idea of her remarriage after her husband's death. They wish to keep her financial assets for themselves. Ferdinand's incestuous desire for his sister provides another reason that he wishes to keep the letter of her body sealed up from any other men.

The Duchess consciously resists these men's wishes to make a monument of her. As much as the brothers would like to keep her confined and frozen, the Duchess has an equal desire to marry Antonio, a servant in her house. To persuade Antonio of her love, she protests that she is a woman, not an artifact: "This is flesh and blood, sir; / 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb" (1.1.454-55). The Duchess promotes her own physicality. She argues too about art and nature with her brothers' unsavory agent, Bosola. Bosola uses rhetorical art to divine if the Duchess is pregnant, by offering her some apricots to see if she will get sick. The Duchess engages Bosola with the same rhetorical arts in discussing the apricots:

*Duchess* 'Tis a delicate fruit;
They say they are restorative?

*Bosola* 'Tis a pretty art, this grafting.

*Duchess* 'Tis so: a bett'ring of nature.

*Bosola* To make a pippin grow upon a crab,

A damson on a blackthorn.

The Duchess, a sophisticated rhetorician (and therefore not a chaste woman), advocates a marriage of art and nature that acknowledges the power of both. The botanical nature of these discussions underscores the way textual interactions mirror and compound biological interactions. As in Volpone's (literally) flowery seduction of Celia, and the various linguistic and botanical poisonings that afflict Ophelia, the Duchess suffers the physical effects of natural, humorally charged products distilled through rhetoric and poetry.

The Duchess's brothers devise cruel and creative texts to punish the Duchess for not sexually constraining herself according to their wishes. They use a series of dramatic texts to castigate her for violating their particular vision of the Petrarchan ideal. Webster's Duchess, like Ophelia and Celia, is a virtuous woman, one appreciated as such by everyone but her closest male relatives. The Duchess, widowed and passionate, secretly marries Antonio, and proceeds to bear him three "streaked gillyvors" much to her brothers' dismay.\(^\text{23}\) The results of this marriage are tragic, and the brothers ultimately order the murder of their sister and her young children. First,

\[^{23}\] I borrow this term from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, (in the aforementioned Norton edition), another play that uses botany to comment upon and to directly affect the sexual integrity of a female character, in this case, Perdita.

\[^{24}\] See also Carroll's discussion of the gillyflower as a sexual symbol in "The Virgin Not," cited above. He makes particular mention of Perdita in his discussion of the "streaked gillyvor" as a symbol of sexual impurity, and an anatomical symbol of the hymen, 22.
however, they torture her, and their mode of torture is theatrical. The men create a
dramatic tableau, staging the death of the Duchess's family. Ferdinand brings waxen
figures to the Duchess's darkened room, and convinces her that they are the corpses of
her husband and oldest son. Ferdinand's dramatic text brings her to despair.

On the heels of this torture, the Duke puts on a drama of insanity, inviting
inmates of the local asylum to gather around the Duchess's home and perform despair
in various guises. After these theatrical torments, The Duke and Cardinal send Bosola
to execute their sister, a fate she accepts so nobly that it causes Bosola a certain
amount of regret, if not enough to stop him. Bosola calls his "guilty conscience" a "black
register wherein is writ / all [his] good deeds and bad, a perspective / that shows us hell"
(5.1.360-363). Bosola's "black register" recognizes the textual nature of his
transgressions and those of the Duchess. Clearly, in Webster's play, the struggle
between art and nature, and the denial of one's physicality can be incredibly tragic. No
one gains through unqualified Petrarchan devotion, and thoughtless art results in
tragedy. The hero and heroine of this play, the Duchess and Antonio, are the only two
people who both follow their natures and can put art in its proper place. Dead,
insensible mistresses cannot bear children and reinforce the social order that idealizes
them. The ideal and the real must conjoin, even if the consequences are sometimes
bastards.

In these dramas, the humoral emphasis shifts from the mistress to the suitors
and the tools of sexual pursuit. The quill, inkwell, and paper evolve into the knife, the
sword, and the body. The symbolic evolution of the tools of seduction into the tools of
violence mirrors the relation Jonathan Goldberg identifies between the role of the hand
in handwriting manuals and its anatomical depiction in scientific manuals such as Vesalius's 1543 *De humani corporis fabrica*. The letters, books, and mini-dramas within these plays bear out what Goldberg calls "the Violence of the Letter." 

His discussion of anatomy focuses mainly on the hand as the instrument of writing and of violence. The plays, however, in their capacity as humoral conduits, inhabit and recreate the entire body, from the inside out. These texts, flowing directly from flayed and damaged bodies, make a study of the characters' anatomy and draw attention to the body's vulnerability to textual penetration. These revenge tragedies force the consequences of textual intercourse outward—for example, the violated Petrarchan mistress in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* ends the play synecdochally as a heart skewered on a sword. Her internal injury becomes an outward dramatic expression, a graphic text for the other characters onstage, and the audience, to read. While the onstage audience may fail to read that text in the way it is intended, this does not change the visceral effect such a text has.

Another anatomical prop, a poisoned skull, "fashioned [not] only for show / And useless property" serves as the murder weapon for Vindice in Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* (3.5.99-100). In the same play, Antonio uses the body of his raped wife, Lucrece-like, as a text to inflame Hippolito and Piero to action against her assailant, Junior Brother. After she has killed herself by drinking poison, he "discovers" her body like a stage property to his audience, and remarks that a "prayer book [is] the pillow to her cheek" (1.4.13). He calls the book a "rich confection" that she had used as a sort of medicine to soothe her pain. In her right hand she holds another book, open to a Latin

---


26 The stage direction at the beginning of Act 1, Scene 4, tellingly uses this theater-specific word to describe Antonio's revelation of the body "to certain lords" to engage them in his revenge plot.
quotation, "Melius virtute mori quam per dedecus vivere" that explains her suicide. Texts (and their curative/inflammatory properties) thus become a part of her body's tableau, and all is to be read and ingested by her husband and his allies.

Webster's Duchess of Malfi, too, repeatedly engages the ideas of the toxic text and its powerful effects on the body. As Bosola illustrates, "Our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in—more contemptible / since ours is to preserve earthworms" (4.2.124-125). He makes this observation after Ferdinand has tortured the Duchess with two forms of dramatic text. He has produced artificial renderings of her husband and son's corpses, and engaged some madmen to perform a raucously absurd theatre outside her door. Ferdinand has "plagued [her] in art," ironically further damaging the body in which "[his] blood ran pure" at one time (4.1.114, 124). The letters, books, and even stage properties of these plays emphasize the violence inherent in the act of writing and the repercussions of that act upon the bodies of writers, readers, and audience members.

Like dramas, letters carry blood and bodily torment; they have the power to inflame and violate, to poison and kill. In The Revenger's Tragedy, Junior Brother, believing himself betrayed by his brothers to the scaffold, describes their final letter as "New-bleeding from their pens, scarce stinted yet" (3.4.60). He equates the bloody letter to his soon-to-be dismembered body, exclaiming, "Would I'd been torn in pieces when I tore it!" (3.4.61). Likewise the incestuous Annabella in Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, attempts to cleanse herself of sin by composing a letter "double-lined with tears and blood" that she will "commit" to "some good man" like the Friar (5.1.33-34). She attempts to cleanse her body of its physical stain through the media of ink and paper. Of
course, like many other ruined women, her body, or its disembodied bleeding heart in this case, must finish that purgation.

Bosola expresses the physical nature of letters more than anyone else, except perhaps for the Duchess herself. For example, to reveal the birth of the Duchess and Antonio's child, and to set his advancement in motion, he plans to send "A letter that shall make her brothers' galls / O'erflow their livers" (2.3.76-77). He ties the act of reading a letter directly to severe shifts in the bodily humors. The mention of gall, too, brings to mind the wasp galls used to make ink necessary to compose such a letter. The Duchess, like Annabella, shows that even the marble fortress of virtue that her body is reputed to be (until her brothers' incestuous invasion of it), is highly susceptible to the effects of texts from letters to dramas to sculpture. Before her strangulation at the hands of Bosola, her body is weakened, not with physical tortures, but with performative and artistic tortures designed to weaken the body and mind together—as much as if she were indeed "broke on the wheel (4.1.81)." The texts with which her brother assaults her violently disturb the equilibrium of her body. They "discover" to the audience the inner workings of her sexuality and her death, like a female corpse in a surgical theater.

The antics of another Duchess, the adulterous manipulator of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, further illustrates the sexuality of the letter, and its potential for violent upheaval. She sends the Duke's illegitimate son, also her lover, "Many a wealthy letter… / Swelled up with jewels," one of which she notices "quiver[ing] in his ear" (1.2.113-114). Her letters indicate the sexual liaison between her and Spurio, and deliver evidence of their relationship to be worn on his body. She too upsets the social order and "Throw[s] ink upon the forehead of [the] state, / Which envious spirits will dip
their pens into" through her ill-advised exchanges of written sexuality. Ironically, the duke is not aware of the Duchess's indiscretions when he speaks these lines, but they apply all the same. No wonder, then, that Hippolito chooses a writing metaphor to explain the situation to Vindice—"The pen of his bastard writes him cuckold!" (2.2.114). Vindice then uses the script of this information to avenge himself upon the Duke with a theatrical presentation of the affair. This presentation, combined with the poison "property" of the skull, creates a fatally toxic dramatic text. The unfortunate audience of Vindice's production, the Duke, watches his own cuckoldry acted before him as his face is half-eaten away with poison, his eyes forced open, and his tongue nailed down with Hippolito's dagger. This scene renders in disturbing, anatomical (and hyperbolic) terms the power that dramatists and the actors have over their audiences. The playwright's inked words, like Vindice's revenge script, affect physical changes in the audience, who with briefly silenced tongues and widened eyes consume the products of the stage.

Just as in the "real" writing of the period, writing within the plays "emerge[s] within larger rhetorics of sex/gender that [are] both reflective and productive of their culture and its institutions."  

27 Masten, Textual Intercourse, 4.

27 Texts published and exchanged in Renaissance drama carry physical burdens of culture, gender, and sexuality. Though not all texts are poisonous, all texts are penetrative and can act upon the body in devastating ways. The published word, whether spoken, read, or written, becomes part of the physiological economy of author and audience. Renaissance drama reminds us of the way we internalize language and the power words have to alter their receivers fundamentally. Othello may insist that "It is not words that [shake] him thus," but the audience knows, in
fact, that Iago’s "medicine works" and "the letters work upon his blood" (4.1.39-40, 42) (4.1.272). By acknowledging the power of the written and spoken word within the plays, early modern playwrights and actors also acknowledged the collaborative exchange between actor and audience, author and reader, actor and actor. Modern-day readers and audiences still speak of "viral" texts on the Internet, or of finding certain books "healing," or certain points of view "toxic." Even for a modern audience, unacquainted with humor theory, these physio-textual exchanges are infinite and their effects immeasurably potent.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: INK AND THE BODY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

"Remember
First to possess his books, for without them
He’s but a sot as I am, nor hath not
One spirit to command…”

—William Shakespeare, The Tempest

I hope to have demonstrated through this dissertation the premise that texts and the humoral body were mutually penetrative entities in Renaissance culture, and by extension, that ink was the principal vehicle of that interpenetration. This premise raises an important question for digital-age readers and consumers of Renaissance texts—what becomes of the text-body connection in an age in which ink and paper are rapidly disappearing as a primary media for discourse? How does our relationship to the texts we read from this period change as we watch them on a screen instead of a stage, or read them digitally through a service like Early English Books Online rather than touching the paper-and-ink texts in the Folger Library or any of the many rare book rooms in university libraries across the English-speaking world? My tentative answer to these questions is that, for the moment, our physical attachment to the text remains intact, no matter the format. The idea of ink as a bodily force, of reading as a physiological activity still obtains in the postmodern era. Our continued obsession with all things textual, even as more of our texts appear on personal digital devices rather than paper, attests to that.

¹ All references to The Tempest (unless otherwise indicated) from Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, eds., The Norton Shakespeare, Vol. 2 Later Plays, 1321-1381.
Indeed, nothing illustrates the postmodern importance of paper and ink evidence than the stubbornly wrongheaded authorship controversies surrounding Shakespeare's plays. The 2011 film *Anonymous*, directed by the popular action film director Roland Emmerich, represents the most recent attempt to bring a theory of alternate authorship to the general public. While later in this conclusion I examine the way that the film uses ink and the body to make its case, here I would just like to note the way the film's very existence reinforces a cultural connection between writing, performing, and the body. The debate about Shakespeare's writing persists, with all the sensation (and half the gravity) of a television talk-show paternity test because "not a single manuscript in Shakespeare's own hand" survives to prove his authorship, or paternity, or indeed humanity. Emmerich and his collaborators, among them some well-known Shakespearean actors like Derek Jacobi and Vanessa Redgrave, refuse to accept Shakespeare as author because they have no inked DNA to prove his paternity, no physical writing. Ink from Shakespeare's personal quill would be as unique and personal as a drop of his blood or a piece of his hair. In spite of all the readily available printed and digitally archived historical evidence, this lack of handwritten proof offers the nothing about which authorship skeptics make their much ado.

The importance of writing, authorship, and collaboration in the production of Renaissance plays influences legitimate criticism of the plays as well. Jeffrey Masten writes in *Textual Intercourse* that, "much of the drama of this period was written by more than one person, produced through collective forms of making." Masten discusses a

---

theoretical collaboration between Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe in which he poses important questions similar to those that arise for skeptics of Shakespeare's authorship, for example, "Whose hand is whose?" or "How do we read the ambiguity of Kyd's syntax: 'some fragmentes of a disputation toching that opinion affirmed by Marlowe to be his, and shuffled with some of myne'?" These questions are important because of the way they echo questions of paternity. Who is the father? If two or more men "converse" with the same woman, or produce the same child/text, how can paternity be determined? According to James Shapiro, with a fair amount of accuracy, in fact. He argues in *Contested Will* that "admitting that a surprising number of plays we call Shakespeare's were written collaboratively" might have helped debunk the insistently biographical readings that contribute to the arguments for and against Shakespeare's "paternity." Within the plays paternity is a persistent unknown, hence the focus on feminine chastity. In the history of the publication and dissemination of dramatic texts, the great unknown is authorship. The biological character of inked texts helps create and reinforce this connection in the popular imagination. To this point, Masten addresses the overdetermined meaning of the word "author" during the early modern period, noting that it goes beyond the modern sense of "a writer of a book or books," and absorbs the additional meanings of "a director, ruler, commander," as well as, "one who begets, a father, an ancestor." So in usage and in staging, the authors and fathers of texts are interchangeable. Both texts and children, it seems, arise from a

---

4 Ibid., 362.
6 Masten, *Textual Intercourse*, 64.
male expression of fluid and then go on to transmit the characteristics of their
author/fathers to others.

Inevitably, as the word "beget" appears in the same *OED* definition of "author"
that Masten cites, one thinks of Mr. W.H., the mysterious "only begetter" of
Shakespeare's sonnets. Whether a typesetter's error for Mr. W.S., or the reversed
initials of Henry Wriothesly, or some other hypothetical person, this "begetter" facilitates
the expression of inked thoughts onto paper for broad consumption, and in doing so
fathers not only poetry, but a large part of the controversy Emmerich exploits in
*Anonymous*. The sonnets themselves promote the humoral and reproductive power of
ink over the human body. Sonnet 11, for example, famously imagines the begetting of a
son in terms of ink on paper, "Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die." The
sonnets, as I show in my second chapter, also draw an explicit connection between
writing and the aging body. Writing preserves a bit of the writer's body on paper for
posterity, just as children can preserve and carry on their parents' bloodlines. Writing,
like procreation, confers a type of immortality. Expressing ink onto a page can yield the
same sort of immortality that Sonnet 18 famously promises "eternal lines" to "give life" to
their poetic subject—the ink becomes an elixir of longevity. In Sonnet 19, "devouring
time" itself ages the Young Man with "lines [from its] antique pen." Pen and ink figure in
many images of birth, aging, and death in Shakespeare's sonnets and throughout
Renaissance drama and poetry.

No one writer acknowledged that connection more explicitly or more often than
Ben Jonson. Jonson's prologues often invoke the play as both a product of the poet's
body and an item for the audience to digest. Jonson also felt very keenly the need to
claim paternity over his own work, as the publication of the 1616 folio of his Works demonstrates. In his dedicatory poem to Shakespeare's First Folio, Jonson echoes Shakespeare's sonnets by calling Shakespeare a "Moniment without a Tombe" who is "alive still while [his] book doth live." The text acts as memorial and legacy in the same way a biological child would. Considering the way texts carry forth the material conditions of the body in a humoral ecology, Jonson's observation is not mere encomium, but a statement of fact. In a recent article, Joshua Calhoun characterizes Renaissance texts, specifically Reformation Bibles, as "palimpsest[s] of plants and animals, social circulation, religious tradition, and textual production." I could not agree more. While Calhoun's argument focuses on paper, and the visible evidence of the flax fibers that go into its making, the substance of ink, as I hope to have shown with my earlier discussions of ink's botanical origins, is also a "palimpsest," one that allows for the fluid transmission of natural, humoral, and physiological matter. What Jonson recognizes in his commendatory verses is that Shakespeare literally lives on in the molecules of ink on the printed page and through the bodies of people who read, speak, and listen to his "eternal lines."

In a discussion of Jonson and textual paternity, Lynne Bruckner observes that, "due to both the construction of the female body and the biological realities of early modern life, there was no guarantee for paternal continuity." The plays use letters and

---

7 Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of my Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and what he hath left us," in The First Folio.
writing as a guiding metaphor to address the great unknown properties, paternity and
virginity, and their attendant cultural anxieties, as well as certain existential anxieties
that have persisted for centuries. Those same unknown properties infiltrate modern and
postmodern discussions of Renaissance writing and authorship, particularly those
surrounding Shakespeare. Shapiro, in his entry into the authorship fray, cites an
anonymous allegory from 1786 entitled *The Learned Pig* in which the Pig "confess[es]
himself to be the author" of several of Shakespeare's plays. The Pig claims that
Shakespeare "has been fathered with many spurious dramatic pieces," once again
invoking the language of paternity to question Shakespeare's authorship.¹⁰

Shakespeare skeptics seem to have carried these early modern anxieties about
paternity and biological provenance straight through to the twenty-first century. Derek
Jacobi, in his opening monologue in Emmerich's film, offers us a story "of quills and
swords" to offset the fact that "not one document," and no "mention of a single book or
manuscript in Shakespeare's own hand" exists. He offers us, in essence, a phallic
fallacy (or fantasy)—one that creates a suspenseful narrative of begetting, which has as
much bearing on the historical Shakespeare as the aforementioned talk-show paternity
test has on actual, non-televised family life. Sir Philip Sidney, in *Astrophil and Stella*,
characterizes Astrophil as an author "Great with child to speak and helpless in [his]
throes" as he writes for Stella. Likewise, the rather too-modern (or, at the very least too-
Romantic) Edward de Vere, whom Emmerich presents as the true author of
Shakespeare's plays, spends the film "biting [his] truant pen" and feeling compelled to
express himself through drama and poetry, conspiratorially rubbing his ink-stained

¹⁰ Shapiro, *Contested Will*, 20.
fingers together as he watches an illiterate actor take credit for his work. While Jonson would certainly disagree with his portrayal as a tool of the aristocratic playwright, he might relish his role as the film's "Ishmael," protector of the body of Shakespeare's works. Jonson, too, never appears without conspicuously stained fingers.\textsuperscript{11}

The trailer for \textit{Anonymous} points to a continued cultural link between ink, blood, and passions. In the middle of the trailer for this film, the audience sees a man arrested, and a splash of ink upon the screen shapes the words, "Between the lines." The trailer cuts to a snowy day and a man with his head on the block (Essex), awaiting the swing of the axe. The executioner swings, and as the axe (presumably) strikes home, a splash of black ink, standing in for blood, fills the screen. The film trailer directly equates ink and blood, and then this ink finishes the earlier sentence with, "Lies the Truth," a pun Shakespeare himself might really have loved. The image of blood as ink reiterates the way that ink presents itself, in modern consciousness as well as early modern consciousness, as the lifeblood of art and humanity.

This film, while getting both literary and historical details spectacularly wrong, manages to correctly (and no doubt accidentally) broach the importance of ink as a humoral, passionate substance. The film visually reminds its audience of the potency and volatility of ink in subtle and not-so-subtle ways throughout. For example, the courtly, sensitive, and terminally misunderstood Earl of Oxford character appears with ink-stained fingers in every scene. This film's Oxford focuses on his writing as a sort of physical and spiritual ejaculation, which certainly follows the contemporary writings of Bright, Breton, and others. For example, Henry Vaughan's poem "The Book," (which

\textsuperscript{11} Thomas A. Pendleton, "Roland Emmerich's Anonymous," \textit{The Shakespeare Newsletter} 61:2 No. 284 (Fall 2011), 76.
figures heavily in Calhoun's analysis of flax and paper) insists upon the importance of
the material on which words are printed. The poem, appropriately, appears in a
collection entitled *Silex Scintillans: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, published in
1655. According to the *OED*, the use of "ejaculation" in the sense of "the sudden
ejection or emission (of seed, fluids, etc.) was historically concurrent with the sense of
"the putting up of short earnest prayers," or "a short, hasty emotional utterance."\(^{12}\) Like
the word "conversation," this word simultaneously conveys physical and verbal
expression, and collapses the functions of the quill, the press, and the body.

The ink stains in this twenty-first century film—whose early modern London
exists mainly on a high-tech CGI green screen—mark the father of the text, the hand
that holds the quill and the sword. The usurping actor, Will Shakespeare, who takes
credit for Oxford's work, does so by "dip[ping] his thumb in an inkwell, pick[ing] up a
quill, and com[ing] on stage to receive the loving plaudits of the crowd."\(^{13}\) He uses ink to
mark himself as an author. Other scenes connect events from Shakespeare's plays
directly to imagined events in Oxford's life, but even these are ink-stained. In a
flashback to Oxford's youth, for example, he stabs another young man, Hamlet-like,

The scene's opening shot rests upon a pile of manuscripts stained by a spilled
inkwell. As the intruder clutches a leaf of paper to his chest and falls to the floor, blood
seeps through the page and mingles noticeably with the ink—recalling the bleeding
Lucrece of Shakespeare's poem. In another scene, Oxford engages in passionate, post-
coital poetry writing immediately after a tryst with Queen Elizabeth. The film's

\(^{12}\) See "Ejaculation, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary* online.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
presentation of this particular sexual relationship, and its hypothetical offspring, grows more preposterous with every incestuous layer it adds. However, the emphasis upon ink as a creative biological substance and a marker of paternity and authorship is one (and perhaps the only) historical nuance that *Anonymous* gets right. The notion of writing springing from the body and brain of a particular human and therefore belonging to that person, in fact even being equated with the child of that person, persists into the current age. Therefore, this film, with its insistently postmodern view of early modern events, manages to capture it.

Much of the criticism on the topic of early modern authorship and collaboration focuses on historic letters, poems, and plays that real people exchanged and on which real playwrights collaborated. I hope to have shown in the preceding chapters that the exchange of fictional texts on the stage carries the weight of biological exchange that pervaded the reading and writing cultures of the early modern period. The influential proliferation of the written word that forged the connection between writing and the body in the Renaissance continues today. The idea of print and having texts in writing still carries rhetorical weight—paper and ink bookstores may be declining, but traditional publishers still sell millions of physical books every year, despite the advent of e-readers and the preeminence of tablet computers like the Apple iPad. Many readers, not just professors and luddites, still embrace the physical book as the ultimate reading experience. Ask most devotees of the codex why they prefer reading this way, and most answer in intimate physical terms—the heft of the book, the smell of the paper and ink, the biological record of dog-eared, fingerprinted, and coffee-stained pages. The codex form engages readers physically, not just cerebrally. Therefore its technological
replacements try to replicate that textual physicality in their ads and with their devices. The readers themselves, while more lightweight than their paper and ink counterparts, mimic the shape and page-turning functions of books. The touch screen allows readers to turn the pages, make notes, highlight text, and even "dog-ear" pages to which they wish to return later.

For example, I have a downloaded copy of *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* available in the virtual library on my iPhone and iPad. The digital copy contains many of the same features as both *The Norton Shakespeare* and David Bevington's *Complete Works*, each of which I have cited in the course of this dissertation. The cover, copyright information, table of contents, illustrations, and introductory material all present themselves in the font and style of the collected works' print editions. I can highlight passages, make notes, and generally use the text as I would a print version. However, I tend not to do that. My copy of the Bevington-edited *Complete Works*, dates to 1990, and is the edition I used in my undergraduate and early graduate studies. The book contains ancient sticky notes, along with layers of marginalia that chronicle the changing of my handwriting from the ages of eighteen to forty. Despite weighing about five pounds, significantly more than the average e-reader, the Bevington Shakespeare has followed me to more library study and writing sessions than I could possibly remember at this point in my life. This heavy, yellowing heap of cardboard, ink, and paper, contains essential bits of my personal and scholarly lives (including coffee stains). And because the technology does not rapidly change, the marginalia of over two decades remains. The documents I typed on my first home computer in the early 1990s are now lost—formatted in a way that does not translate to
modern devices. I saved some of them in hard copy format—the only sure form as word-processing technologies evolve. They are a physical memento of myself in my early twenties, and a keepsake. This irrational and personal attachment to the physical document, I believe, is a carryover from the earliest inked pages, and one that persists despite, and perhaps because of, new textual technologies.

The visual presentation of these technologies supports the ongoing significance of ink on a page. Apple's iBooks application for the iPad stores icons of users' books that look like book covers lined up on a wooden bookshelf. My *Oxford Shakespeare* rests there, alongside cookbooks, novels, and other items of interest—an eclectic mixture of texts that would seem as much at home in the bookstalls in front of St. Paul's Cathedral as catalogued on a digital device. Virtual fingerprints and coffee stains have not yet been added to the texts, as far as I know, but the visual nod to the physical text remains. This format is not only to persuade traditional book lovers that digital reading allows for the same textual interactions as paper reading, but to preserve the connection readers feel with the readings they consume and the writings they create. Certainly the use of machines to create texts, from printing presses, to manual typewriters, to word processors, has altered writers' and readers' connections to their texts.\textsuperscript{14} But rather than make writing less intimate, the effect seems to have been the opposite. The ability to carry around an entire library of texts on one's person and to share that library with intimates of one’s choice creates a circle of textual sharing that mimics the circulation of sonnets among small groups of early modern peers.

\textsuperscript{14} Joshua Calhoun makes a persuasive case for this in his discussion of Bible paper in "The Word Made Flax," observing, "the rhetorical effects of the surfaces on which words appear." He argues that the cheap, flimsy paper on which Bibles were (and are) often printed can serve to devalue the content of its pages for readers. He makes the same observation about the early versions of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1.
Furthermore, we still care about the physical substance of those devices. As Calhoun notes, Apple markets the newest iPad by noting that it is environmentally sensitive, arsenic free, and recyclable. The new technologies are as much a circulating, tangible product of readers’ physical environment as their printed predecessors. Ink may no longer compose these texts, but early modern perceptions of ink and the body still inform postmodern textual exchanges.

A recent Kindle Fire advertisement marks the persistent connection between bodies and texts in much the same way as Emmerich’s film does. The ad encapsulates the history of textual production in thirty seconds. The television commercial begins with the image of a pen being dipped into a pot of ink, then writing a quotation from Voltaire, "The instruction we find in books is like fire." The advertisement, despite being for a high-tech digital reading device, immediately promotes itself as the newest conveyor of very old media—the quill, the inkwell, paper, the printing press. Like these ancient implements, the Kindle advertisement links a piece of technology to the bodies of its audience. The next image is of a typesetter’s ink-stained fingers setting the n in the word kindle in a typeset copy of the context surrounding the Voltaire quotation. The advertisement, rather than visually embracing the digital technology that makes printed texts accessible, instead promotes the physical connection the technology has to the ink and paper that preceded it. This e-reader advertisement celebrates the tradition of ink, paper, and the body that informs the concept of reading for most people. It infuses the

---

15 Ibid., 16.

16 The advertisement to which I refer aired during the fall of 2011, and I used the version available on YouTube for this analysis.
digital device with that physicality. This advertisement, in other words, celebrates the very type of writing and reading that the Kindle e-reader is designed to replace.

The advertisement’s next image is of a pair of ink-free female hands holding the device and looking at a picture of another woman doing the same. The visual stack of available magazines—*Vanity Fair, Marie Claire* among them—each look as they do in print, on a newsstand. The digital appearance approximates the print appearance to increase the product’s appeal. The answer to the question of why an advertisement for a digital reading device would remind its audience of the importance of ink and paper lies in our physical, even existential connection to such texts. The e-reader positions itself as an extension of that physical relationship—a product to be held, carried close to the body, and operated by touch just like its codex ancestors. The ink and paper are gone, but their deep and affective relationship to readers’ bodies remains intact. The original source of this relationship comes in part from early modern writing and printing processes in combination with contemporary ideas about the humoral body.

The headnote to this conclusion, from one of Shakespeare’s most self-consciously theatrical dramas, underscores the power that books wield over mere human actors. Caliban's admonition to Trinculo and Stefano regarding Prospero’s books illustrates the importance, even the necessity, of printed materials to Prospero’s physical mastery of his island and all its inhabitants. With the printed words in his books, Prospero creates pain and controls desire. This play addresses the playwright’s power over his actors and audience, to “[transport them] into the world of possibility that is also the world of theater and of art.”17 But in addition, the play emphasizes the textual and

---

physical nature of that control. Caliban and Ariel do represent Prospero's id and imagination, respectively—two separate components of the magician/author's identity.\(^{18}\) However, taken together, the two characters form a textual triumvirate with Prospero—the blackness of ink and the "spirit" that flows from the imagination to the paper, transmitting a range of passions to its primary reader, Prospero. He, then, like an alchemist (or a playwright), transmutes those inked words into something more valuable—power over his captive audience, the island's temporary inhabitants.

Ben Jonson captures the idea of textual alchemy of the type that Prospero practices in his Prologue to *The Alchemist*, noting that London, like Prospero's island, contains a motley list of characters "whose manners, now called humors, feed the stage; / And which have still been subject for the rage / Or spleen of comic writers."\(^{19}\) Jonson acknowledges the way the body, stage, and pen interact to create theatre. Prospero's humors likewise "feed" the island, in fact they have created it—its weather, its spirit natives, all live at the mercy of the ruler's books and the playwright's pen. Certainly Caliban carries the rage and spleen of his master as Prospero prods and antagonizes him to do his will. Jonson's prologue also neatly engages the forgiveness with which Prospero's manipulations end. Jonson insists that, "[his] pen / Did never aim to grieve, but better men." Jonson, like Prospero, claims that he will use the power of the pen to heal rather than harm, even if his methods seem cruel. Caliban, blackened like the inscribed page, embodies these cruelties more than any other character.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 853.

Though Caliban refers to the magical spirits of air that Prospero uses to persecute him, the word "spirit" of course reads another way. By reading the words from these pages, Prospero manages not only Ariel, but all the other physical "spirits" within the bodies of the actors in his private revenge play. He induces sleep, inflames lust, and plagues his former persecutors with melancholy. He inflicts physical wounds on Caliban, "cramps, [and] / Side stitches that shall pen [his] breath up" (1.2.330-331). Interestingly, Caliban's curse in response to his mistreatment, that "As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed / With raven's feather from unwholesome fen / Drop on you both!" evokes no image so much as that of the quill and inkwell. A blackened feather dipped in liquid calls up plaguing winds and threatens to raise blisters on its unfortunate objects. The illiterate Caliban, all too aware of the book's power to enforce physical suffering, retaliates with a violent and grotesque distortion of the tools of writing. He raises the specter of quill and ink before conspiring to destroy Prospero's books. *The Tempest*, like so many early modern dramas, reminds its audience of the power of the written word to both infect and heal the humoral body. The central role of Prospero's books is to manipulate the passions of actors and audience. Prospero's similarity to the playwright, then is not only in the commonly observed fact that he directs people's action and manipulates their emotions, but that he does so using inked words on a page.

To demonstrate the way the writing/body connection still works in textual exchange, I return to James Shapiro and his response to the renewed cultural skepticism about Shakespeare's authorship. During a lecture by Professor Shapiro that I attended, he discussed an ongoing literary debate he was having with retired Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens. Justice Stevens, along with fellow Supreme Court
Justice Antonin Scalia, counts himself among the Oxfordian theorists. Shapiro explained that his argument with Justice Stevens began in an unusual way for digital-age correspondence, by handwritten letter. According to Shapiro, their argument about the origins of Shakespeare's plays is ongoing, as is their written correspondence. So it appears that, even now, when anyone can access the First Folio on a computer screen, and anyone can post an eviscerating review of a film like Anonymous online, one of the most prominent scholars of Shakespeare's work chooses to present his counterarguments in print and via handwritten letters. My own copy of Contested Will is not electronic, like my Oxford Shakespeare, but paperback, and is signed by the author. And despite the fact that I did not witness the signing, I have decided, in the spirit of Shapiro's argument for the authenticity of Shakespeare's writings, to accept this indication of authorship as authentic.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hecht, Paul J. "Rosalind and Wroth: Tyranny and Domination." Presented at the 2011 annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Seattle, WA.


MacDonald, Joyce Green. "Speech, Silence, and History in The Rape of Lucrece."


